Supporting Children & Young People to Heal from the Trauma of Family Violence

City of Yarra

August 9 2023

Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians and owners of this land and waters. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to the children who are their leaders of tomorrow. We acknowledge their history and living culture and the many thousands of years in which they have raised their children to be safe and strong.

Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation

We Help Children Heal

On their own, children do not recover from the devastating impact of abuse, neglect and family violence. They need specialised support to heal. We provide therapeutic services to children.

We Keep Children Safe

We build the ability and confidence of individuals and organisations to protect children. We provide parents with education and support to help them raise happy, safe and loved children.

We Stand Up for Children

We advocate for changes to laws and policies that help to make all children safer. We work to strengthen community attitudes that prioritise the rights of children to live and safe relationships.

We Create Understanding for Children

We educate and support adults who look after and work with traumatised children to be better able to understand and respond to their complex needs.

Australian Childhood Foundation

Family Violence Learning Series

What is the Family Violence Learning Series?

Safety

The content of this training can evoke strong emotions and may stir up personal experiences of trauma.

Please be mindful of your own wellbeing during this training and if you need support please ask the facilitator.

Learning Outcomes:

Review a shared platform for understanding family violence and how we construct our understanding of its impact.

Explore a framework that supports recovery for children, in the context of safety, reconnection, and nurture with their parents and carers.

Consider how we support parents to provide relationally reparative contexts in the aftermath of family violence.

Practical ideas to support reconnection and recovery.

Developing a shared platform for understanding

Family Violence as Trauma
- Neurobiology
- Trauma and it's Impacts
- Safe and Secure Framework
- Practioner Wellbeing

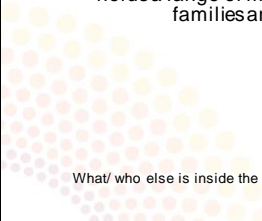Australian Childhood Foundation

---

Safety is a central whilst complex concept in this work. It holds a range of meanings for us and for the children families and communities that we work with.

What does a safe space feel like for you?

How do you inhabit it?

What do you bring to it to make it feel safe?

What/ who else is inside the space that contributes to the safe nature of it?

Australian Childhood Foundation

Neurobiology

Australian Childhood Foundation

Culture is part of development

- Our culture influences our brain development
- Our relationships influence our culture and our culture influences our relationships
- Sensory data is interpreted according to our culture long before our ability to think about and understand our culture

WHAT IS YOUR STORY?

Australian Childhood Foundation

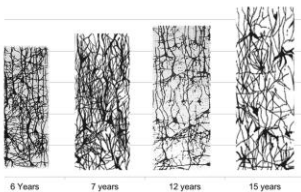professionals.childhood.org.au

Neuronal development
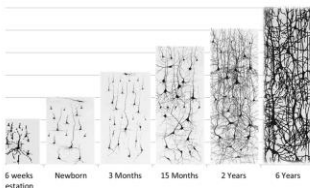
- Rapid growth occurs from birth to 6 years
- **Critical period** of development
- Healthy neuronal development occurs through **relationships, regulation, repetition**

6 weeks gestation   Newborn   3 Months   15 Months   2 Years   6 Years

Australian Childhood Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

Neuronal development

- Early years – period of **rapid growth**
- Followed by onset of puberty in which **synaptic pruning** and **formation of new neurons** occurs.

6 Years   7 years   12 years   15 years

Australian Childhood Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

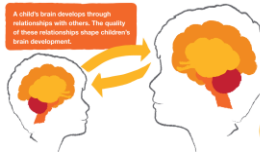## Sequential brain development – building blocks

The Thinking brain
3-5 Years

The Emotions and Memory
Brain - Birth to 4 years

The Movement Brain
Birth – 2 years

The survival brain
Pre birth to 8 months

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

Brain Development: Key Themes

- The brain develops through a mix of genetics and environmental factors.
- Central to development and functioning is the relational context in which the brain develops.
- There are critical periods of development, trauma experiences during critical periods can result in significant impacts later in childhood and into adulthood.
- Culture influences brain development in utero-sensory based

A child's brain develops through relationships with others. The quality of these relationships shape children's brain development.

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

Trauma and it's Impacts

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

Slide 1

Defining trauma

Any single, ongoing or cumulative experience which:

- is a response to a **perceived threat**, usually to survival
- **overwhelms** our capacity to cope
- feels/is **outside our control**
- often evokes a **physiological** and **psychological** set of responses based on fear or avoidance

Developmental

Simple

Complex

Intergenerational

Transgenerational

Australian Childhood Foundation

Slide 2

Trauma can impact all elements of Child's development: brain, body, memory, learning, behaviour, emotions, relationships.

Australian Childhood Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

Slide 3

Developmental Impacts

Pre-natal – 2 years Brainstem & Cerebellum Limbic Lobe (inc. Amygdala & Diencephalon)	Pre-term birth, low birth weight Irritability, sleep and settling issues, feeding issues Frequent crying, difficult to comfort/soothe	Passive, withdrawn, Limited interpersonal interaction or engagement Delayed speech & language, motor skills and physical development
3 – 6 years Limbic lobe Cortex	Overwhelmed by emotions, difficulty naming/expressing emotions, aggression, anxiety, Intrusive/distressing memories, hypervigilance, hyperactivity Psychosomatic problems: e.g., headaches or body pains, regressed toileting or failure to attain toilet training	Difficulty with changes and transitions Re-enactment of DFV through interactions and play Difficulty playing well with other children, difficulty with empathy and reading social cues Sleep disturbance
7 - 12 years Cortex Integration of L & R hemispheres	Memory and concentration issues Difficulty regulating emotions, anxiety Behaviours that challenges; aggression, difficulty adhering to rules Difficulty forming and maintaining friendships, social withdrawal	Intrusive/distressing memories, hypervigilance, hyperactivity, sleep disturbance Feelings of shame and low self-esteem Beliefs that "normalise" violence and conflict
13 – 18 years Cortex Pre-frontal Cortex	Self-harm/suicidal behaviour, substance misuse, high-risk behaviours Difficulty trusting others, unstable and conflictive relationships Relationships that resemble the dynamics of DFV Symptoms of anxiety, depression, and fluctuating mood	School dis-engagement and academic performance issues Intrusive/distressing memories, hypervigilance, hyperactivity, sleep disturbance Issues with self-esteem, identify and self-worth Body image and/or eating related concerns
Impacts on stress response and physiological arousal: Effects at any age and stage	Stress response – autonomic, protective/defensive, biochemicals released. Nervous system response, chronic HPA Axis activation	Increased baseline arousal level = constant state of vigilance and heightened alarm. Easily triggered - responses seem 'out of the blue'

Experience of Family Violence

Includes when children and young people are exposed to:

- Seeing the impact of the violence (bruising, distress, damaged property etc.)
- Witnessing their mother/father lying about how injuries have occurred
- Sensing their mother's fear
- Living with the effects of violence on the health and parenting capacity of their mother
- Having their possessions destroyed.

Trauma and Loss

Family violence can lead to experiences of loss on multiple levels for children. These include:

- A loss of sense of safety and connection in relationships.
- A loss of predictability and familiarity.
- A loss of (or re-structured) contact with one of their parents and possibly other family members.
- A loss of routines, home, friends, belongings and neighbourhood.
- A loss of what has been.

Australian Childhood Foundation

Trauma and Loss of Culture

- Family violence disconnects children from their culture, and hence, their identity. This includes:
  - The meanings associated with the beliefs of their family and community.
  - The principles that their culture offers them about what is right and wrong; what is respectful and disrespectful.
  - An understanding of what it means to belong, how to be in relationships and fulfill their responsibilities.
- Children affected by family violence live in between worlds, neither of which feels secure.

Australian Childhood Foundation

Involving the child

A child or young person may be used as a way to maintain power and control. Tactics include:

- Using the child as a hostage or as a means of ensuring the mother returns/stays home
- Forcing a child to watch or participate in assaults
- Interrogating or involving the child in spying on mother
- Undermining the mother by encouraging negative opinions of her abilities, character or appearance.

Australian Childhood Foundation

Impact on parent – child bond

- Diminishes capacity for mother to be present for her child
- Often preoccupied with the perpetrator
- Little capacity to provide nurturing or strengthen attachment with child
- Mother likely to have a diminished sense of self
- Perpetrator often sabotages relationship with the child
- Perpetrating parent, who should be a source of safety is their source of fear

Impacts on parent-child relationship

- Reliance on self protection when safety is not provided
- Reliance on self-soothing when co-regulation is not available
- "Irresolvable Paradox" - biologically primed for dependence on the parent who is the source of terror (perpetrating parent) or unable to protect (non-offending parent)
- Parent locked into stress response (hyper or hypo-arousal) – unable to tune into and respond to child's cues, states and needs
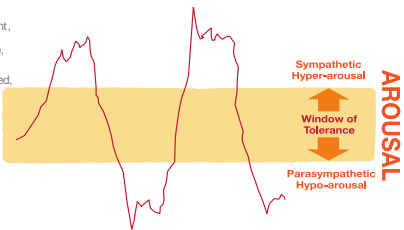- Role reversal- instrumental and/or emotional parentification

Relational Impacts

Dys-regulated Arousal

Fight or Flight hyper-vigilant, action-orientated, impulsive, emotionally flooded, reactive, defensive, self-destructive

Freeze Physically immobilized, frozen, tense musculature

Submit Collapsed, weak, defeated, flat affect, numb, empty, helpless, hopeless

Ogden, Minton, Pain 2006

Sympathetic Hyper-arousal

AROUSAL

Window of Tolerance

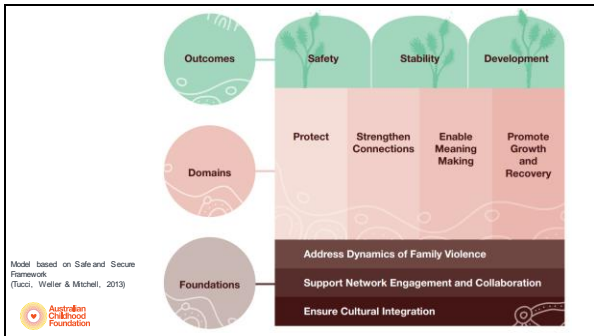Parasympathetic Hypo-arousal

Reflection

Does your program/service focus on any of these areas of impact in particular? If so, what is the rationale/intent for that focus?
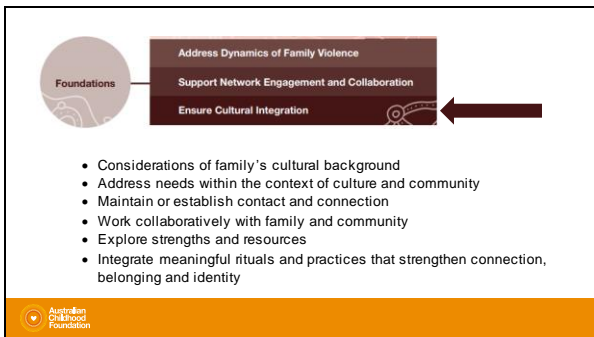
How are these areas of impact captured in your assessment processes? Are there any that are missed out?

How do you evaluate progress for clients in these areas?

Safe & Secure Framework

Australian Childhood Foundation

Model based on Safe and Secure Framework
(Tucci, Weller & Mitchell, 2013)

Australian Childhood Foundation

- Considerations of family's cultural background
- Address needs within the context of culture and community
- Maintain or establish contact and connection
- Work collaboratively with family and community
- Explore strengths and resources
- Integrate meaningful rituals and practices that strengthen connection, belonging and identity

Australian Childhood Foundation

Foundations

| Address Dynamics of Family Violence |
| Support Network Engagement and Collaboration |
| Ensure Cultural Integration |

- Children and young people benefit from a collaborative approach
- Shared understanding of the issues, goals, actions
- Build a platform for communication and coordination of responses
- Mediated and run through structures such as care teams
- Regional FDV Networks
- New model – FDV Hubs

Australian Childhood Foundation

Foundations

| Address Dynamics of Family Violence |
| Support Network Engagement and Collaboration |
| Ensure Cultural Integration |

- Identify and challenge specific underlying dynamics that lead men to engage in violence
- Address psychological, attitudinal, social and cultural issues
- Strategies which hold men accountable for their violent behaviour
- Supporting women in their efforts to hold men accountable

Australian Childhood Foundation

Domains of Intervention

Australian Childhood Foundation

Slide 1

| Domains | Protect | Strengthen Connections | Enable Meaning Making | Promote Growth and Recovery |

Protect the child and create safety

In groups, discuss:

• How can we support a child and their parent/carer to experience felt safety?

• How would we know that a child is beginning to feel safe? What might we see?

Australian Childhood Foundation

Slide 2

Protect the child and create safety

Safety for children is experienced in:

• The predictability of their routines
• The felt experience of their physical environment
• Attuned relationships with their mothers and other important adults
• No longer fearing that the violence will return
• Having their needs understood and responded to

Australian Childhood Foundation

Slide 3

Neuroception

• "The removal of threat is not the same as the presence of safety" (Porges, 2014)

• We need to help children who have experienced trauma detect more features of safety in their environment.

Australian Childhood Foundation

Protect: Strategy approaches

- Reduce uncertainty
- Promote felt safety across environments
- Care and service delivery - where, when, who, how
- Anticipate, validate and address worries
- Orienting to space
- Pandemic implications

Australian Childhood Foundation

| Domains | Protect | Strengthen Connections | Enable Meaning Making | Promote Growth and Recovery |

Strengthen the relational connections around the child

- Identify, support and establish relationships that are committed, nurturing, available and responsive
- Resource and strengthen the connection between the child and their important adults
- Relational mapping – identify kinship and community relationships
- Sibling and peer relationships
- Relationship with parent who has used violence

Australian Childhood Foundation

Strengthen Connections

Relationships that support recovery and healing in children:

- Are tuned into children's needs
- Show children that they are understood
- Offer comfort and co-regulation
- Define violence as unacceptable
- Reflect back to the child a picture of themselves as worthy, loveable and deserving
- Include adult-initiated REPAIR after RUPTURES

Australian Childhood Foundation

P.A.C.E – Playful, Accepting, Curious, Empathic

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

Strengthen Connections: Strategy approaches

- Connect child to services – involve child and parent in planning; complete introductions and handovers
- Resource Mum to be able to tune in to child
- Create opportunities for play and joy
- Create sensory anchors for 'holding in mind'
- Consider if/how/when/where/why for child to have contact with parent who has used violence
- Maintain connection with important peers and adults

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

Strengthen Connections: Strategy approaches

Therapeutic relationship:

- Take time for rapport building, creating safety, trust
- Flexible and multimodal engagement options
- Develop agreed Plan A and Plan Bs
- Create a therapeutic online space
- Include activities that promote 'getting to know you' or attunement/connection

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

| Domains | Protect | Strengthen Connections | Enable Meaning Making | Promote Growth and Recovery |

Enable Meaning Making

- Multiple opportunities, in collaboration with safe adults
- Development of stories between children and safe adults
- Learning how the body responds to sensations of stress & arousal
- Supporting children to access strengths within their culture or beliefs
- Helping children create and hold onto meanings that incorporate safety and hope

---

Enable Meaning Making

Enable Meaning Making

Making sense of the impacts of violence across levels of functioning:

- Sensorimotor – help me understand how my body reacts and holds my story
- Limbic – help me understand, tolerate, express, and receive comfort through my emotional experiences
- Cognitive – help me articulate and re-write my story
- Creative – help me express old and new meanings through creative storytelling

Enable Meaning Making: Strategy approaches

- Create and maintain a stable platform
- Repeated opportunities
- Orient and prepare the safe parent and important adults
- Regulating nervous system responses
- Processing experiences through creative work
- Art, play, music, dance, creative writing
- Describe behaviour as being meaningful

Australian Childhood Foundation

Promote Growth and Recovery

"**Recovery is not a fixed outcome to be arrived at, but rather an ongoing journey to be continuously facilitated for children affected by family violence.**" (p. 49)

- Developing a positive and coherent sense of self
- Transferring new skills and beliefs to other contexts
- Re-orienting towards the future

Australian Childhood Foundation

Promote Growth and Recovery: Strategy approaches

- Developmental milestones – catch up and thrive
- Type and timing of specialist referrals/assessments
- Facilitate goal-setting & future-orienting
- Opportunities to try new things
- Share stories of strength, survival, hope and healing
- Embed self-worth and healthy relational values for the future

Australian Childhood Foundation
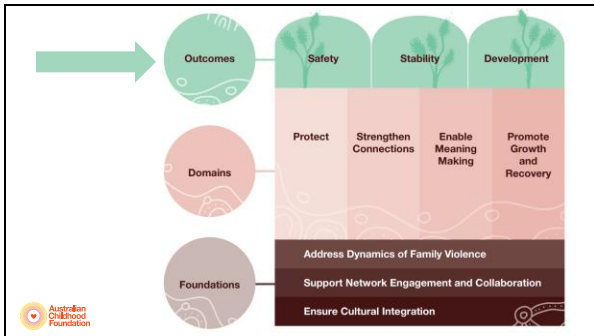
Outcomes

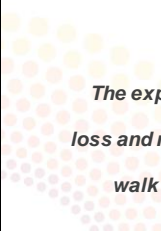

Outcomes of Intervention

The intended outcomes of intervention are safety, stability and development.
Achievement of these requires that:

- Children's past is understood.
- Children feel assured that they are loved.
- Children feel confident that their future sense of belonging is secured.

Practioner Well being

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and
loss and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to
walk through water without getting wet.
(Remen, 1996)

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

professionals.childhood.org.au

Questions to consider

- How are you doing?
- Where do you go for support?

- Have you been in a professional dynamic that allowed for reflection, challenge, growth? Was this formal or informal? What made it have impact on your development?

- Who is looking after the Staff brain?
- Where do Staff go to regulate?

Australian
Childhood
Foundation

Thank you for participating in todays session.

Jen Knoll
jknoll@childhood.org.au

Australian
Childhood
Foundation