

# TEACHER RESOURCES: TRAUMA RESPONSES IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (6 -12 YEARS)

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## Developmental challenges for children aged 6 –12 years

Children in middle childhood begin to develop their sense of self and begin to understand their place in society. The child develops and needs increasing independence and decision making. Piaget describes the child's emerging ability to use logic. The child increasingly takes into account multiple aspects of a problem to solve it and has an increasing ability to view things from another's perspective. The child can solve problems that apply to actual (concrete) objects or events, but not abstract concepts or hypothetical tasks. Montessori describes this period as the Construction of the Intelligence. Children develop reasoning with imagination and logic and have an intense thirst for knowledge - the child wants to know about the world and his/her place within it. We see the transition from concrete to abstract thinking.

### Parenting and environment post trauma

Following trauma, such as the Black Saturday Bushfires, parents may be preoccupied with coping with disaster and providing life's necessities such as replacing their home and coping with their own loss and grief. This usually results in parents keeping children close and increased monitoring of their activities. However, the child needs positive reinforcement and encouragement to develop skills and autonomy however anxious parents may be reluctant to give child autonomy.

### How do children aged 6 –12 years react following trauma?

The child may experience increasing isolation and feel unable to voice their fears and anxieties as they may perceive that they upset their parents and teachers. The child may have behaviours associated with early developmental stages such as still wanting to sleep with parents at night, and feel guilt or anxiety and shame because of this. They may experience guilt if their need for independence and autonomy causes stress in parents.

Middle childhood is a period of exploration and learning, however children are still dependent on their parents to provide a safe and nurturing environment. Exposure to disaster can undermine the child's confidence. Post-trauma reactions may interfere with the child's cognitive ability such as memory and attention. As a result deficits in knowledge may emerge in the months or years following trauma exposure.

Children showing symptoms of distress benefit from early intervention to help alleviate symptoms, to ensure behaviours do not become engrained, to ensure that they continue to thrive, and to maximise their developmental trajectory. Some symptoms of distress that may commonly be exhibited by children in this age group include:

- *Re-experiencing* (eg, distressing memories that pop into their head during the day, nightmares, emotional and physical distress around reminders, repeated discussion about event, re-enactment of trauma in play)
- *Avoidance* (eg, refusal to participate in school activities related to disaster, refusal to talk about event, memory blanks for important aspects of event, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities)
- *Hyperarousal* (eg, increased irritability and anger outbursts, difficulties concentrating, overly alert and wound up, increased nervousness and jumpiness, sleep disturbance)
- *Emotional numbing* (eg, appearing flat, no emotion related to event)
- *Emotional distress* (eg, self-blame and guilt, moodiness, crying and tearfulness)
- *Behaviour changes* (eg, angry outbursts, aggression, non-compliance)

## AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

- *Decline in school performance* as a result of school non-attendance, difficulties with concentration and memory, lack of motivation
- Increase in *physical complaints* (eg, headaches, stomach-aches, rashes)
- *Withdrawal* from family and friends
- *Appetite changes*
- *Anxiety and fear* of their own safety or that of loved ones (eg, increased clinginess).

### Key points

- Children aged 6-12 years are vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma.
- There can be tremendous individual variability in trauma responses.
- The school can provide an important role in identifying children experiencing problems especially if parents and caregivers are also coping with their own grief and loss.
- Post trauma reactions may interfere with the child's cognitive ability such as memory and attention. As a result deficits in knowledge may emerge in the months or years following trauma exposure.
- Early intervention is recommended.