



Trauma, young people and Juvenile Justice

The trajectory and outcomes for children and young people who have been exposed to trauma and adversity has been well documented. Some children, particularly those in families who are supportive and supported, will be resilient to trauma and will go on to live life largely unscarred by their traumatic experience. However, the children who experience multiple adversities; the children who experience the particularly damaging impact of child abuse and neglect and domestic violence; and the children who do not have supportive families who are able to provide appropriate care and responses, may have a different outcome.

We know that trauma can lead to health and mental health difficulties for children and young people, as well as difficulties in managing emotions, difficulty in regulating behaviours and difficulties in sustaining supportive relationships with others. Research has found that trauma during childhood is associated with developmental difficulties; mental health difficulties; physical health difficulties; substance abuse; and involvement with police and the justice setting.

The majority of young people who are involved in the juvenile justice system have faced traumatic experiences and serious adversities. A survey of young people in juvenile detention in NSW found that 81% of females and 57% of male young people reported that they had been abused or neglected¹. A significant proportion of these had experienced severe abuse or neglect. Other research has found that approximately 80% of young people in juvenile justice settings in Australia have experienced multiple traumatic stressors².

Often when we look at the young people who are involved in juvenile justice, we first see their offence and their behaviour. However, these young people all have a unique story that has brought them to this

point in their lives. Understanding more about this story, the prevalence of trauma in this population and the impact that trauma may have on some young people, can bring us part of the way towards helping them.

What is trauma and adversity?

The terms trauma and adversity include a range of experiences that can have a negative impact on the development and wellbeing of children and young people. The greater the number of traumatic or adverse experiences, the more likely it is that there will be a significant impact on the child's development and emotional and physical health.

Trauma and adversity includes:

- » Child physical, sexual and emotional abuse
- » Child neglect
- » Exposure to domestic violence or other violence
- » Death of a parent or carer or another close family member
- » Having a parent or carer involved in the forensic system
- » Exposure to a natural or man made disaster
- » Living in poverty and financial hardship
- » Homelessness
- » Being bullied
- » The experience of displacement, seeking asylum and being a refugee
- » Exposure to drugs and alcohol in utero
- » Transgenerational trauma ie the trauma that is passed down from the parents lives to that of the child, particularly relevant in Indigenous young people.

It is important to remember that not all children and young people who have these experiences will



Trauma, young people and Juvenile Justice

be traumatised; some will be resilient. The impact of a traumatic event is determined not only by the nature of the event but also by the impact on the child or the child's response to the event.

How does trauma impact on young people?

Trauma can have the most significant impact on children when they are exposed to trauma and adversity in the first 3 years of life. During this time there is a huge amount of brain growth and activity, particularly in the areas that control learning and emotional self-regulation. Exposure to abuse, neglect and domestic violence during this period of time can have a great impact on the child's ability to develop emotionally and cognitively. It is also during this time that the child needs supportive and protective relationships with adults in order to learn how to control their own emotions, learn about social norms, develop empathy and learn how to interact with others.

The experience of significant trauma during this time can derail a child's development if proper supports or treatment are not accessed. It is not likely that just one traumatic event will lead a young person to become violent or antisocial, but a series or pattern of traumatic events, with none, or limited, support and protection from adults, places young people at a high risk of becoming involved in offending behaviour as a young person.

Young people who have experienced significant trauma as a child often have difficulties in:

- » Controlling their emotions
- » Relating to others, or forming supportive relationships with others
- » Showing empathy towards others
- » Concentration

- » Learning and education. This may be affected due to the developmental and mental health difficulties experienced as a result of trauma, or also by the ongoing chaotic nature of family life.

These young people may also be affected by mental health difficulties as a result of their exposure to trauma. This can include posttraumatic stress reactions, anxiety and depression. There is also new research to show that many young people who develop psychotic disorders have a significant history of childhood trauma.

Young people affected by trauma are also more likely to:

- » Self harm
- » Attempt suicide
- » Abuse drugs and alcohol

How can I relate this to my work with young people?

Trauma informed care understands the impact of trauma on children, young people and families. It is an approach to engaging young people with histories of trauma that recognises the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives. The more you come to know about the nature of trauma and the impact that it has had on the young people you work with, the more you will be able to understand some of the behaviours you encounter every day. Asking young people about the trauma and adversity in their lives is often the first step that you can take in helping them to address its impact.

Young people can be very resilient, even in the face of ongoing and multiple adversities. Young people who have supportive and caring adults in their lives are more likely to be able to make positive decisions in their lives. Helping young people to access appropriate services to assist them to address the



Trauma, young people and Juvenile Justice

impact of trauma in their lives, as well as increasing the supportive connections they have, through education and other areas, all helps to mitigate the effects of trauma, increase coping skills and assist the young person to move forward.

For more information:

- » ACATLGN website – Trauma and Abuse, Neglect and Violence webpages
- » www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au
- » National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), US. www.nctsn.org

Written by:
Amanda Harris

Psychologist and Director of Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network.

1 2009 NSW Health Young People in Custody Health Survey

2 The Royal Australasian College of Physicians 'The Health and Wellbeing of Incarcerated Adolescents', 2011, Sydney