

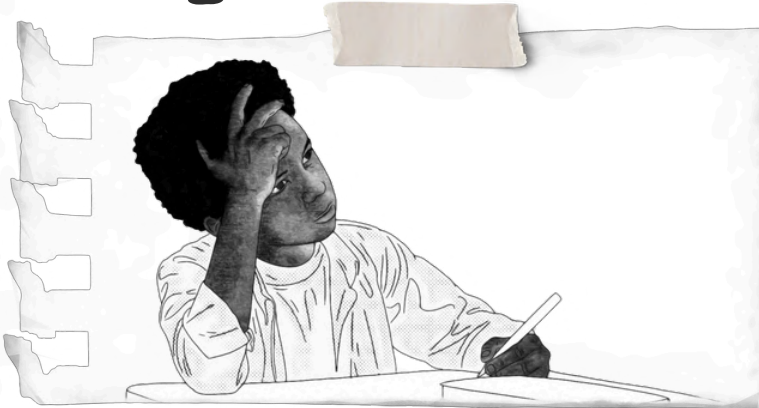
# HOW DOES TRAUMA AFFECT CHILDREN'S LEARNING?

By Julie Neale,  
Integrative Child and  
Adolescent  
Psychotherapist  
and Teacher

**We know that experiencing trauma early in life changes the way that a child's brain develops, and one area that this affects is their ability to take in new information.**

Children who have lived through trauma often struggle in school, and traditional teaching approaches may not reach them and enable them to learn.

## Cognitive Skills



Trauma disrupts the development of the pre-frontal cortex which is key for focus and decision making. This means that children who have experienced trauma often struggle with poor attention, memory and problem-solving skills, impulse control and social skills.

## Emotional Dysregulation & Hypervigilance

Early exposure to stress results in the brain spending a lot of time in a heightened state of alert. The brain predicts the worst based on previous times of danger, and the child's behaviour is dominated by the survival responses of fight, flight, freeze or collapse. This dysregulation in the stress response system impacts the brain's executive functioning and makes it harder for the child to engage in learning.





# Attachment

Relationships – trust and attachment, typically built in early childhood are essential for forming positive relationships with teachers and peers. Children who have experienced trauma often struggle to build these relationships leading to isolation and difficulties in group learning situations.

They may misread social cues, have trouble with empathy or act defensively and aggressively because they feel scared, all of which can impact classroom dynamics and peer relationships.

A lack of trust in caregivers/teachers may reduce the child's willingness to seek or ask for help or to engage in the pupil/teacher relationship.

# Language & Communication



Developmental trauma may slow language development, affecting literacy learning and understanding. Communication skills can also be impacted. When the brain prioritises survival, language learning and verbal expression can take a back seat. This can hinder reading and writing abilities, and limit a child's capacity to express what they need or to ask for help.



# How the challenges show up at school

Some children who have experienced developmental trauma may find it difficult to:

- Concentrate
- Follow instructions
- Retain information
- Manage transitions
- Respond with balanced or age appropriate emotions to situations

....all of which are essential to be able to manage school successfully.



## In the classroom these struggles can show up as:



- Frequent outbursts
- Disruptive behaviour
- Distracted or distracting
- Appearing as "zoned out" or "day-dreaming"

Teachers (and parents) can sometimes, and understandably, misinterpret these behaviours as deliberate defiance or laziness, rather than as indicators of trauma related distress.



Without trauma-attuned support, children may experience further alienation from learning – **leading to a loop of negative feedback and failure:**

Child is struggling in class, doesn't know how or isn't able to ask for help.

They might:

- zone out/look like they are day-dreaming
- become disruptive or distracted
- become angry or aggressive

The child feels like a failure and/or under threat and their survival state becomes even stronger. Their future relationship with this teacher may become more and more turbulent or disconnected.

Teacher understandably becomes frustrated as this can look like defiance. This frustration shows in the teachers words, tone, body language and/or facial expressions.

The teachers frustration intensifies and consequences are put in place. For example, detentions, moving into another class or taking away social time, (where the child might be able to regulate themselves).

The child's survival mode becomes even more activated and survival behaviours intensify. They may become even more disruptive, aggressive or defiant, or completely shut down.

# Effective Support

Effective support for children with developmental trauma requires trauma-attuned educational practices.



## For example:

- Safe, predictable, consistent environments
- Clear and structured timetables
- The building of strong relationships with trusted adults
- Adapting teaching strategies to accommodate emotional and cognitive challenges

## Adaptive teaching methods might include:

- **Chunking of tasks:** Break lesson objectives into smaller steps to avoid overwhelm
- **Multi-sensory learning:** combining visuals, movement and hands-on activities to learn new concepts (regardless of age)
- **Flexible pacing:** Allowing the child frequent breaks from the learning process or extra time.
- **Help to strengthen executive functioning:** through checklists, timers, visual graphs for timetables etc.
- **Scaffolding instructions:** Repeat, simplify, use concrete examples. Ask for repeating of instructions to show they have understood the task.
- **Peer buddies:** pairing with a supportive classmate for group work.
- **Trauma-attuned praise:** "I can see you tried hard" rather than praise based on results.



Becoming trauma aware empowers teachers to feel better equipped to support children whose emotions, behaviour and learning are all affected by early trauma.

**With a compassionate and trauma informed approach, schools can play a pivotal role in helping children with developmental trauma reach their full learning potential.**



## Supporting Services

### RAMP at Beacon House

A Reducing Anxiety Management Plan at Beacon House is a co-constructed plan made with the young person, their parents or carers and key staff from their school or education setting.

It help schools to support children who may be finding it more difficult to self-regulate, possibly struggling with peer relationships and who may be emotionally and behaviourally younger than their chronological ages, as a result of early experiences of trauma and abuse.

**[Click here to find out more about our RAMP service.](#)**

### Therapeutic Educational Psychology

We take a therapeutic approach to educational psychology, developing a holistic picture of the child's needs and the needs and strengths of the adults around them, in order to recommend a plan for learning and therapeutic intervention across home and school.

#### **We offer:**

- Consultation to parents and professionals
- Direct Assessment with children and young people
- Organisational consultation
- Supervision
- Training

**[Click here for more information about our Education Psychology service](#)**



# National Trauma Assessment Service



We approach all our Therapeutic Needs Assessments as a relational, respectful and inclusive process guided by the voices of both the young person and the people around them.

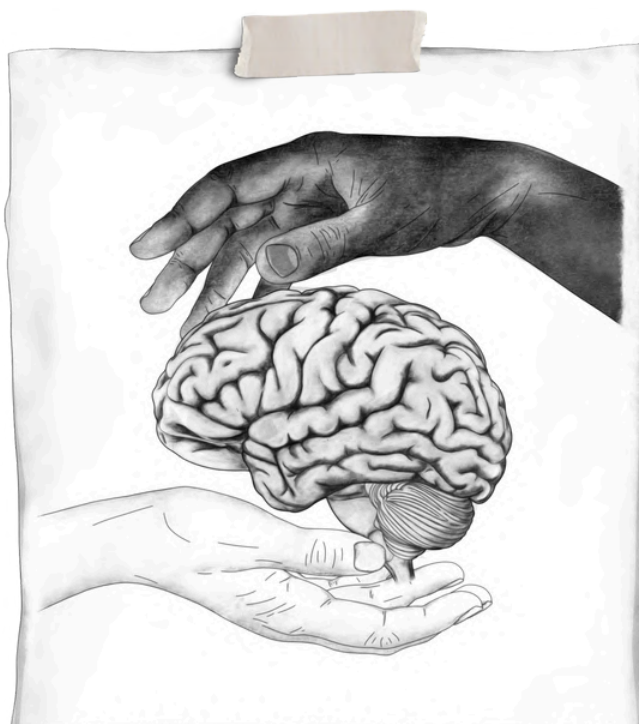
We believe that a thorough assessment is a really important beginning for any ongoing therapeutic support. Assessments can also be very helpful in guiding networks around young people so that professionals are working effectively and creatively together.

**[Click here for more information.](#)**

## Training with Beacon House

We are passionate about creating training experiences that are informative, inspirational and impactful. Learning happens best when the body, heart and head can all take in new information at the same time, therefore our training aims to combine knowledge with beautiful artwork and invitations for personal reflection.

We offer a range of pre-recorded trainings, available for you to watch any time; alongside our live online webinar series hosted by our specialist therapists. Visit **[www.beaconhouse.org.uk/training](http://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/training)** for more information.



In addition to our pre-recorded training and live webinars, we offer in-person and online training for schools, businesses, local authorities and many more.

For a bespoke quote for your organisation, please contact Rebecca at **[training@beaconhouse.org.uk](mailto:training@beaconhouse.org.uk)**