

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives

Difficult behaviour in the classroom: why these behaviours happen and how to handle them

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives sometimes seem to be developmentally below their chronological age and also may have developed strategies for survival that are difficult for you to manage in the classroom.

What you might see

- A child who struggles to concentrate and even to sit still
- A child who often stops others working
- A child who is unwilling to accept correction
- A child who struggles with praise
- A child who has difficulty coping with a change of routine
- A child who has difficulties making and maintaining friendships
- A child who has difficulty working in a group or sharing materials
- A child who shows extremes of emotions but struggles to talk about them
- A child who is always on the outside and doesn't engage with the lesson
- A child who "blanks" you or struggles to make eye contact
- A child who tells far-fetched lies and adamantly denies any blame in the face of the obvious truth
- A child who is verbally or physically aggressive to adults and/or peers
- A child frequently runs away or hides



How it can feel for you

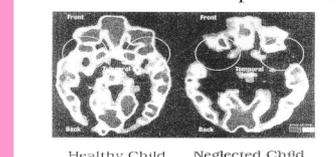
- Very frustrating and hard to understand
- Hurtful, especially when you try so hard to support them
- Stressful and therefore emotionally and physically draining
- Undermining of your personal and professional confidence
- That others seem to manage the child well and don't share your view of them
- Despairing and hopeless: "nothing I try seems to work"
- Threatening to your authority over the classroom



Why do these children act out these difficult behaviours?

- Their early life experiences have taught them that the way to survive or get recognition is via these kinds of behaviour
- Previous experience of little or inconsistent routines in the numerous homes and schools in which they have been
- The child's experiences may have resulted in learning difficulties or delay with consequential feelings of frustration and embarrassment. The above "tactics" are to mask these feelings
- The child's negative view of themselves and the world, learned through their poor start to life, makes it hard for them to trust and accept your more positive views. Equally, their fragile sense of self cannot cope with your criticism
- Being able to cope with feelings and calm themselves down is a skill learned through a child's early significant relationships. Problems here lead to delayed emotional development
- Early relationship problems also lead to delays in the development of the brain. This creates differences in various thinking skills e.g. poor cause and effect thinking. Consequentially, a child may be unable to do as you ask, rather than deliberately not doing so

Effect of extreme deprivation



A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here.

Ways to avoid problems

- Discipline depends on a positive relationship – not the other way round. Therefore take time to get to know this child
- Try not to use strategies that humiliate or isolate the child e.g. sending them out of the room, writing their name on the board or making them stand at the front of the class
- Your example will always be more powerful than your words – acting calmly, supportively and respectfully will set the tone that you need
- Always be respectful even when they “don’t deserve it”. Shouting, sarcasm, humiliation and ridicule will worsen your relationship with this child and the problems between you
- Set out clear simple expectations and comment when the child meets them
- Routine and rituals really help these children e.g. how you begin and end your lesson
- These children crave attention – give small regular doses before they show you that they need it in a way which you’d prefer them not to do e.g. thumbs up, special smile, meet and greet at start of lesson, acknowledge when you see they have their hand up (not necessarily always asking them for the answer)
- Make sure that the child can do what you’re asking academically of them - these children can be very good at hiding their difficulties
- Think carefully about where you seat the child. Having their back to the wall can reduce their stress level – and therefore yours! Pairing or grouping them with appropriate pupils may help your plans
- Give only one simple instruction at a time – some children may respond better to you calling their name and waiting for eye-contact before giving your instruction



Ways to deal with problems

- Think about what the child’s behaviour is communicating. Have they become over-tired, anxious, embarrassed? Are there particular difficulties at home at the moment?
- Use distraction techniques at the right moment – ask the child to choose between two simple tasks for you if they are beginning to lose concentration and trying to pick a fight
- Focus on priorities. Ignore minor things and having “noted” significant issues, follow up on these later, this avoids public confrontation and allows cool-off time for you both
- When following up an earlier incident, choose your time and place. Listen to the child’s point of view, focus on their behaviour rather than character and don’t get drawn into an argument or try to trap them in a lie. This is not a battle to win but a problem to solve together
- Rather than a set sanction, a consequence that is linked to what they have done wrong will help the child to build new brain pathways that will help them link cause and effect
- After dealing with a difficult incident, it is crucial to make an early opportunity to re-establish a positive relationship, giving back to the child the self-esteem they so badly need. As the adult, you will need to take the first step and be aware that the child may struggle to reciprocate
- In advance, have a plan with supportive senior staff for those occasional times when things get out of hand

How to look after yourself – yes, you especially need to read this bit!!!

- Be kind to yourself. Set realistic, achievable goals with these children. At times, success may just be not going backwards
- Seek the support of others, both within and outside school. CAMHS can offer a range of tipsheets and consultation for parents, carers and other professionals. Training to schools in relationship to attachment difficulties can be made available on request
- Working with these children can be extremely exhausting emotionally and physically. Take every opportunity to take care of yourself
- Get your manager and other significant people in school to read this tipsheet to help them understand and support your work