

Providing Early Intervention for Traumatised Children  
in the Middle Years



10<sup>th</sup> March 2020



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Alexina Baldini  
Psychologist  
Enable Workplace Consulting

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This webinar is for you if you:

- Confidently want to know what to do when you are working with a distressed child or adolescent in the middle years of schooling
- Are interested in the responses of children and adolescents transitioning from the end of primary school to the start of secondary school
- Work with young people after a range of incidents or with children and adolescents who may come from a trauma background including complex trauma

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A bit about me



- Studied Behavioural Sciences (Psychology) after leaving school
- Initial specialisation in adolescent and child psychology
- Worked in settings with children and adolescents who had contact with child protection plus behavioural issues often due to disability and/or trauma
- Introduced to crisis response and headed up support teams in government and private practice
- Later specialised in forensic settings including youth justice
- Now doing this type of work because I love helping others to reduce distress and recover as rapidly as possible from trauma

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Overview of what will be covered

- Developmental tasks expected of the age group we are talking about
- Impact that the disruption of trauma has on that development
- Jordan – a case study in complex trauma
- Concept of cognitive load in relation to trauma
- Strategies that address trauma for those transitioning between primary and secondary schooling
- Additional strategies to tailor your support to each individual child or adolescent, factoring in their presentation and circumstances

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What developmental tasks do 10-14 year olds need to achieve?



Two age groups relevant:

- 7-11 years
- Industry versus Inferiority
- Children busily learn to be competent and productive
- Work hard to be responsible and to accomplish more complex tasks

Or

- Feel inferior and unable to do anything

Erik Erikson

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### Erikson: Adolescence (12 years upwards)



Erik Erikson

Identity versus Role Confusion

- Adolescents try to figure out, "Who am I?"
- They establish sexual, ethnic and career identities that they will often take into adulthood
- Begin to form values and challenge the self-confidence they have built over the preceding years
- Choose peers they feel reflect their values and sense of self

Or

- Are confused about what future roles to play

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Have you seen young people seem confused about their identity?  
What does that look like?

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### Impact of complex trauma on development

Survival mode

- "Rabbit in the headlights" look
- Turn red and clench their fists
- Breathe more rapidly
- Begin moving because body getting ready to run or react
- Burst into tears or look as if they are about to cry
- Act out or withdraw

Joyce Dorado – Cofounder and Director of UCSF Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS)

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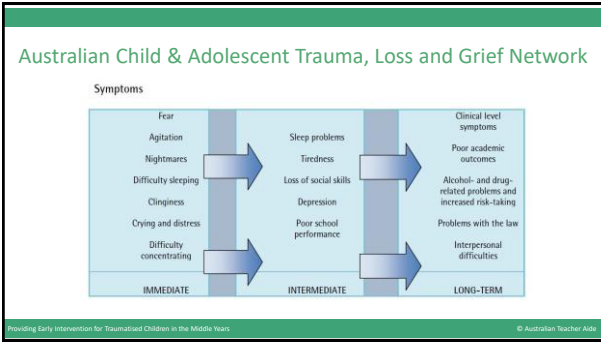
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Can you think of an example of a child you have worked with that you have seen this progression in?

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### Examples of trauma reactions in young people

*Meet Sarah: 13 years old*

Sarah seems to be having a lot of difficulty talking about the fires and always seems on edge.

Sarah is 13 and lost her house in the Black Saturday Bushfires. Even though it's been a while since the fires, she still gets quite upset when she's reminded of anything to do with the bushfires. If anyone in the class starts talking about the fires, she starts crying, becomes agitated or leaves the room. Sometimes during class, she looks as though she is just staring off into space and will only respond when her name has been called several times. Last week, she became visibly upset when she heard a siren outside the classroom. She went white and started shaking. Sarah also just doesn't seem to be able to relax and always seems on edge.

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Case Study - Jordan



Let's look at Jordan – his story is in the Handout ...

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Case Study - Jordan

- Primary school student
- Commenced Year 6 last month
- History of 4 schools in the last 6 years
- Often arrives at school late
- Often looks unkempt
  - hair unbrushed
  - clothes ill-fitting
- Generally not equipped for activities
- Usually does not have food provided from home
- Can present as unwashed with body odour



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Case Study – Jordan: Behavioural

- Usually late to school
- Tends to withdraw
- Keeps to self
- Sits with arms crossed and head down
- Gravitates to back or edge of classroom
- Lashes out at peers if they try to engage him



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Case Study – Jordan: Academic

- Repeated Year 5 last year
- Difficulty comprehending new material
- Withdraws if material is “too hard”
- Demonstrates knowledge of “cops” and criminal processes



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Case Study – Jordan: Background

- Lives with single mother
- Mother has a history of mental illness
- In foster care on numerous occasions
- Sexually abused by male foster carer when 8 years old
- Father unknown



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What information indicates that Jordan may have experienced complex trauma?

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### Cognitive load

Concept that the human brain can only handle a limited amount of new information at a time

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/cognitive-load-theory-in-practice](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/cognitive-load-theory-in-practice)

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### How memory works

- Working memory: small amounts of short-term information are processed here
- Long-term memory: Large amounts of information are stored semi-permanently here
- Working memory can become overloaded
- Memory overload can be prevented

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### Cognitive load strategies

- Tailor lessons according to students' existing knowledge and skill
- Use worked examples to teach students new content or skills
- Gradually increase independent problem-solving as students become more proficient
- Cut out inessential information
- Present all the essential information together
- Simplify complex information by presenting it both orally and visually
- Encourage students to visualise concepts and procedures that they have learnt

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Concept of emotional load



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What sorts of situations may contribute to emotional load?

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Create calm predictable transitions

- Dr Adam Fraser – The Third Space – research into transitions
- Transitions between activities can easily trigger a student in survival mode
- The feeling of “uh oh, what’s going to happen next?” can be highly associated with a situation at home where a child’s happy loving dad can, without warning, turn into a monster after he’s had too much to drink...



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Build a Routine Around Transitions

So that young people know:

1. What the transition is going to look like
2. What they're supposed to be doing
3. What's next



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What have you found helpful as a transition for a child or young person who has a trauma background?

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Remember: Sensitive feedback helps!

For children who have experienced complex trauma, getting in trouble can sometimes mean either they or a parent will get hit ...

And for others, "I made a mistake" can mean, "I'm entirely unlovable"

School personnel need to be particularly sensitive when providing corrective feedback to students who have experienced such trauma

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### Mindfulness in the classroom

Adaptations may be required

- Guiding students to focus on a spot in front of them so no one feels stared at, can be helpful
- Instead of focusing on how the body feels, have students focus on a ball or other object they're holding in their hands – what it feels like in their palm
- Focus on the sounds in the room or of noises outside the classroom – something external to the body

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### Additional strategies

Encourage self-regulation and co-regulation outside the classroom for comfort and safety



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### Sensory strategies

Sensory input opportunities like sand, blu-tac, other fiddle toys can help take the focus from the internal to the external and provide calm



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Consistent strategies

Have a consistent schedule  
(wherever possible) with a familiar  
person around



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Strategies that provide clear directions

Common language of expectation and support:

- Role clarity
- Who does what when?
- What is the role of the teacher?
- What is the role of the teacher aide?
- What supports do others provide?

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Clear and open communication between teacher, teacher aides  
and other support personnel

*Remember your own needs while looking  
after the transitions of the young person  
you are supporting!*

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Let's recap

1. We've looked at the developmental tasks children in the upper primary and lower secondary years face

2. We understand that trauma can disrupt achievement of those developmental stages

3. We've looked at a case study of a Year 6 boy with complex trauma

4. The concept of cognitive load and emotional load have been highlighted particularly in the transition between primary and secondary school

5. Lastly, we've examined strategies that address trauma and minimise risk

6. Now, you'll be able to select appropriate strategies that tailored for your support to each child or young person, considering their individual needs and situation

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To find out more:

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• Go to my website at [www.enableworkplace.com.au](http://www.enableworkplace.com.au) or

• Call us on +61 3 9663 9168

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Q & A

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