

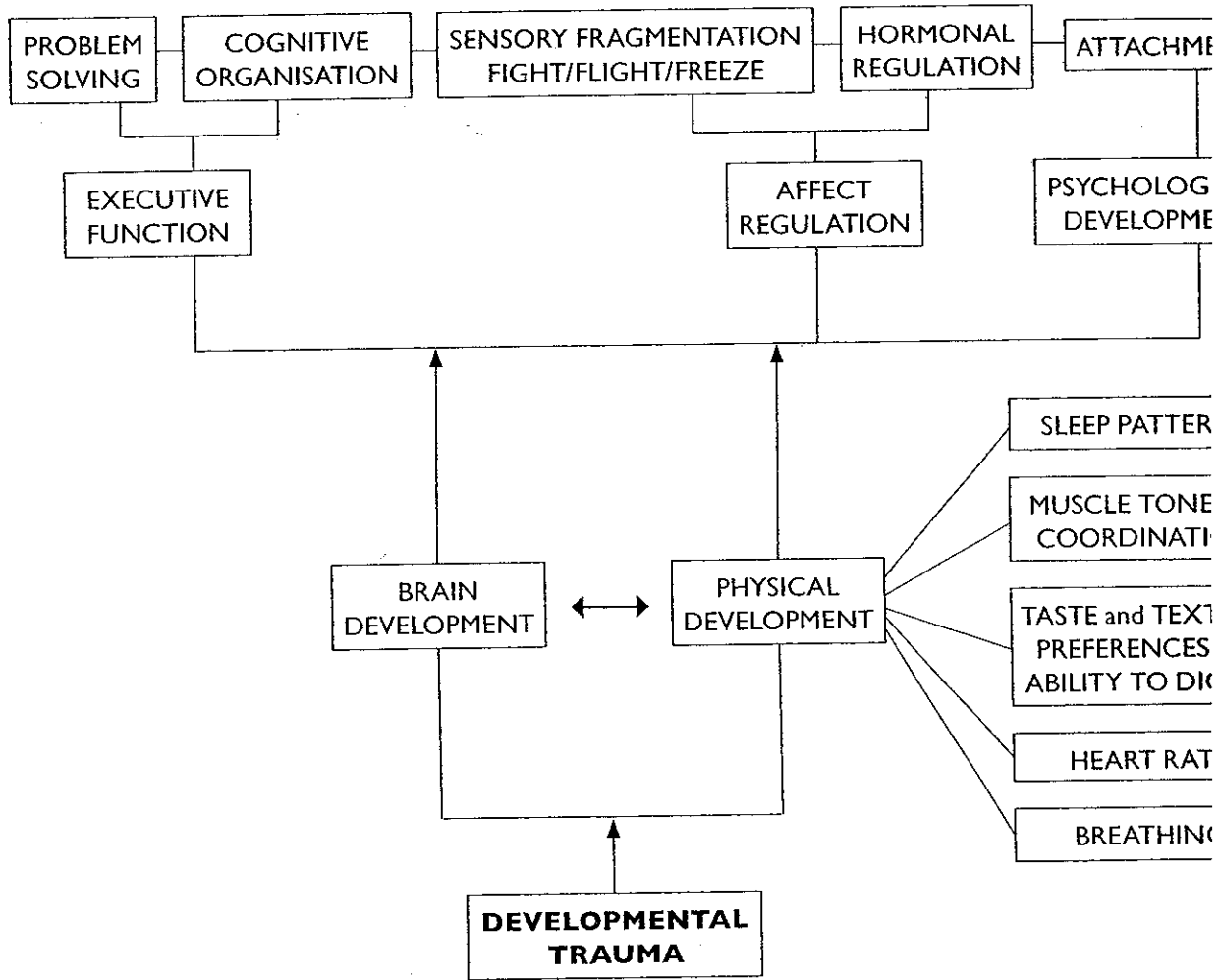
---

# The effects of developmental trauma

Before we get started on our journey through the school day, exploring possible inclusive principles and strategies, I believe it's important that we take a short detour. Our detour will enable us to reflect on the impact of relational trauma and loss upon specific areas of development, described now collectively as 'developmental trauma'.

First, we'll take a look at a flowchart that provides an overview of the possible areas that are likely to be affected. Then I'll describe what we might observe in our pupils' ways of being in school in regard to the difficulties they may be experiencing in their executive functioning, affect regulation and psychological development. Finally, I'll reflect on the wide range of specific problem areas that have repeatedly shown up for these pupils in the school context. Grasping the gravity of all of this will, I think, not only aid our understanding and empathy for the pupils who we support in our classrooms, but will also mean that we won't be able to view additional support as a luxury any more, or as simply an excuse for bad behaviour, but as the *necessity* which it actually is.

The flowchart on the following page has been reproduced with the kind permission of Alan Burnell of Family Futures Adoption and Adoption Support Agency. It very clearly presents the areas of a child's functioning that are likely to have been affected by developmental trauma. To read the Trauma Tree, start at the bottom of the page. As you progress up the tree, it becomes clear that the impact and effects of trauma on brain development and physical development are intertwined.



The Trauma Tree's 'roots' are in the prolonged neglect, deprivation, loss, abuse, violence, upheaval or any combination of these that the child has experienced in his or her early childhood, fundamentally affecting the development of brain, body and the relationship between them.

## TRAUMA TREE

As we go through an average school day in the life of a pupil who has experienced relational trauma and loss, looking at how to meet the challenges the day presents in an attachment-friendly way, it will be important for us to keep these difficulties in mind; so it's a useful chart to refer back to. We will also need to remember that while a certain level of stress can be helpful in making us feel and stay alert, the stress experienced by these particular pupils is way above the usual thresholds. So their performance and learning is often severely compromised.

This section goes into more detail for each of the areas highlighted on the Trauma Tree to ensure that we are clear about possible difficulties. Please note that in all the following features, there are many examples I could have used! I've selected some common areas of difficulty that I frequently encounter on my visits to both primary and secondary schools. There are obviously examples included that could have other possible causes too, rather than or as well as the ones outlined. Nothing is clear cut when we are observing or relating to human beings. We are complex. The examples used are merely intended to give us clues as to what to look out for, to encourage and cultivate a curiosity about the pupils with whom we work, to start us off in our reflective practice. It's the overall pattern of difficulty and needs, plus our knowledge of the pupil's difficulties, that will give us the best understanding.

## Executive functioning

This involves the pre-frontal cortex of the brain. Various researchers have described executive function as a set of cognitive abilities that control and regulate other abilities and behaviours. These can include:

- an ability to initiate, organise and stop actions
- an ability to monitor, evaluate and then change behaviour as appropriate
- an ability to plan future actions when faced with new or different contexts
- an ability to anticipate what might happen and to adapt
- an ability to form concepts and to think more abstractly

Some of the specific difficulties we might observe or notice in the classroom could be:

### Initiating

Pupils having difficulty starting off a piece of work or a task unsupported or without prompts. *For example*, the pupil staring into the distance whilst the others have already written a paragraph. Or the pupil who doesn't seem to have any ideas of her own to start up new project work in class.

### Using working memory/recall

Pupils having difficulty remembering what is known or was learnt recently.

Difficulty in doing more than one thing at once.

*For example*, the pupil only able to remember the first or last instruction on a complex a list, or unable to listen and make notes at the same time.

### Planning and organising

Pupils having difficulty bringing order to concepts or working out how to do a given task and carrying out plans. Difficulty problem-solving and prioritising.

These pupils often get distracted or confused in completing tasks, especially longer term projects, or get bogged down in unimportant detail.

✦ *Organising ourselves*

Pupils having difficulty being in the right place at the right time.

*For example*, the pupil arriving late to his form group or his next lesson, or the pupil missing a crucial deadline with her homework.

✦ *Organising materials*

Pupils having difficulty organising what is necessary for particular contexts or constantly losing things.

*For example*, the pupil turning up at PE without kit, or the pupil who comes to Maths having lost her calculator for the third time this term.

### **Making transitions (shift)**

Pupils having difficulty shifting attention or transitioning between one focus, task, topic or place to another, or responding differently when the context/routine changes.

*For example*, the pupil may still be at his desk whilst the rest of the class are lining up for assembly or the pupil may become very agitated when there is a change of plan, she has to work with a new teacher, or when the class goes off-timetable.

### **Monitoring and evaluating**

Pupils having difficulty being aware of their need to check back or check out the impact of her effort, action, behaviour on herself and others.

*For example*, the pupil rushing through a piece of work and thinking it's complete when it's not, or the pupil unaware of how his wild and aggressive behaviour is alienating other children.

### **Exercising emotional control and managing frustration**

Pupils having difficulty in both expressing and regulating their emotions.

*For example*, the pupil may laugh uncontrollably or lash out at another pupil when feeling frustrated.

**Inhibiting inappropriate behaviour**

Pupils having difficulty in blocking out distractions or controlling their impulses.

These pupils don't look before they leap!

*For example*, the pupil goes over to another group and interrupts them mid-task or the pupil asks the teacher a question loudly in the middle of silent reading.

**Affect regulation**

These are some of the difficulties I've regularly come across in schools with respect to affect regulation.

**States, sensations and feelings**

Pupils having difficulty knowing what is going on in their bodies, and therefore responding inappropriately or in an unhealthy way.

*For example*, the pupil running about in a t-shirt in the snow unaware that he is cold despite goosebumps, or the pupil not eating any lunch despite her tummy growling, clearly hungry.

**Self-soothing**

Pupils having difficulty knowing what to do when they have a need or feel uncomfortable, wobbly or dysregulated; often engaging in actions that make them feel worse rather than better.

*For example*, the pupil who feels like he doesn't belong, running offsite and engaging in risky behaviour or the pupil who starts hurting herself when she is upset.

**Comfort levels**

Pupils having difficulty knowing the boundaries of comfort. These pupils often walk a tight line between pain and comfort, inappropriate and appropriate touch.

*For example, the pupil who pulls his trouser belt so tight it leaves a mark or the pupil who masturbates at her desk.*

### **Over-sensitivity to sensory touch**

Pupils having difficulty receiving accurate or appropriate signals from the different sensory receptors on their bodies.

*For example, the pupil who feels like he is being strangled when the top button is done up on his shirt or the pupil who becomes hysterical when she gets paint on her hands.*

### **Dissociative responses**

Pupils having difficulty remaining in the 'here and now' – accepting who they are and experiencing and owning their personal feelings and responses. An avoidant strategy to manage a sense of being overwhelmed; yet this is quite often an over-reactive response to the 'here and now' context.

*For example, the pupil who turns into a wild cat when he feels uncomfortable in the Literacy class, clawing at his peers, or the pupil who uses a different voice to her usual voice when she is feeling anxious.*

### **Being able to settle**

Pupils having difficulty sitting still for extended periods of time.

*For example, the pupil fidgeting at his desk, up and about, out of his seat, rocking on his chair or wriggling around on the carpet.*

### **Hypo/hyper responses**

Pupils having difficulty responding in a modulated way – either remaining unmoved or responding in an over-reactive way.

*For example, the pupil who sits and stares or falls asleep during the music lesson despite the class using instruments or the pupil who starts break-dancing in the middle of a quiet classroom of pupils working through a maths worksheet.*

## **Psychological development/ Ability to form secure attachments**

These are some of the areas pupils appear to have particular difficulty with:

### **Following the lead of the teachers/support staff**

Pupils having difficulty trusting the motives and intentions of the adults.

*For example*, the pupil not following instructions to line up for the next class or the pupil running off after being asked to stay close by an adult during break.

### **Relationship difficulties**

Pupils having difficulty knowing how to make and keep friends.

*For example*, the pupil running up to his peers poking them to try and connect, or the pupil jumping around being the class clown in order to gain others' approval but the others being irritated by this, keeping a distance: or the pupil being possessive over a friend, unaware of how to give her friend space or how to engage with her.

### **Emotional and social age**

Pupils having difficulty responding in an age appropriate way due to not having negotiated or consolidated necessary developmental tasks yet.

*For example*, the pupil aged 11 happily playing with cars and trucks alone, or the pupil aged 14 rolling down the mud bank repeatedly at lunch time.

### **Control**

Pupils having difficulty relinquishing control to another pupil or adult.

*For example*, the pupil who is adamant that she will sit where she wants to despite the seating plan, or the pupil who always has to have the last say when instructions are being given out.



**Over-reaction to experiences/events**

Pupils having difficulty engaging in an appropriate modulated response to everyday occurrences or low level stressors.

*For example*, the pupil engaging in a full-blown rage in response to someone brushing past him in the corridor, or the pupil covering her ears whilst other pupils are communicating with their talk partners during a history lesson.

**Heightened levels of anxiety**

Pupils having difficulty being at ease in themselves and with others.

*For example*, the pupil who scans their classroom constantly or the pupil who is preoccupied by the visitor in class today, watching his every move whilst he carries out a classroom observation.

**Toxic/pervasive shame**

Pupils having difficulty processing usual forms of discipline without falling apart, due to a sense of feeling that they are fundamentally flawed or a mistake.

*For example*, the pupil who leaves the classroom swearing after his name is put on the board or the pupil who trashes the classroom after the teacher gives her a stern look. Over-reactive responses are commonplace.

**Permanency**

Pupils having difficulty realising that they can still be kept in mind or connected to, despite separation.

*For example*, the pupil who keeps talking to the teacher or shouting out in class – anything to be remembered, to stay connected.

**Constancy**

Pupils having difficulty realising that someone is capable of feeling different feelings at the same time or using different parts at the same time and yet remaining whole.

*For example*, the pupil who thinks the teacher must hate him now as she was upset

by his behaviour, completely oblivious that she still likes *him*, just not his behaviour.

### **Panic/fear**

Pupils having difficulty acknowledging or sharing any vulnerability or sign of helplessness, in particular to adults. Often bravado, but can also be more visible. *For example*, the pupil who rages or behaves in such a way as to keep others at a distance and yet in other contexts communicates fragility; or the pupil who trembles and cries when the teacher addresses the class telling them they must all do much better in future.

### **Trust**

Pupils having difficulty relinquishing any control to an adult – even in very ordinary circumstances, not trusting them to know what they are doing. *For example*, the pupil who won't allow an adult to see the work he's doing or comment on it, or the pupil who jumps in to sort out a fight between two older and stronger pupils despite there being a senior manager nearby.

### **Mixed up motives and intentions**

Pupils having difficulty reading others and their social interactions; often concluding that others are out to harm them in some way. Assuming the worst. *For example*, the pupil who thinks that a boundary put in by the teacher communicates that the teacher must be out to harm him, or the pupil who catches someone glancing at her shouting, "*What are you looking at?!*"

### **Fear of abandonment**

Pupils having difficulty experiencing relationship withdrawal as anything other than a form of punishment.

*For example*, the pupil who stands at the door of the Inclusion room knocking constantly after being asked not to enter for a moment, or the pupil who follows staff around the school building.

**Feeling unsafe**

Pupils having difficulty experiencing safety in the classroom or Inclusion room that is actually set up as a secure base for the pupil.

*For example, the pupil hiding somewhere in the school or the pupil running out of a lesson and climbing up the nearest tree.*

Once we start developing a comprehensive perspective of the way in which these different areas of difficulty inter-relate, we'll have a far more accurate starting point (then we've been previously using) in terms of making sense of how we see our pupils behaving day to day in our schools. From this viewpoint, we'll then have a much better idea of the most appropriate intervention to use with the pupil we are working with – whatever their chronological age. What is most important is their *starting point*.

**Internal working model**

We also need to be very aware of how these pupils view themselves and others. They view the world from the perspective of their early experiences (as we all do), so it's essential that we don't misinterpret their interactions with us by making assumptions about their perceptions and responses.

Geddes (2006) has written extensively about this area as to why the pupils in our care see themselves the way they do and why they do what they do. Her writings on this subject make essential reading and are a backbone to all the strategies we will be exploring later. Pearce (2009, p.36) supports others' findings by describing very clearly the pupil's view of themselves and others. A pupil with insecure attachment difficulties will have 'negative attachment representations' (as outlined below) which

form, as Bowlby (1980) described it, an unconscious 'internal working model' based on the pupil's past experience of problematic relationship to himself and the world.

<b>I AM</b>	<b>OTHERS ARE</b>
Bad	Unreliable
Unlovable	Unresponsive
Unsafe	Uncaring
Undeserving	Unsafe
Impotent	Don't understand me

Most of our pupils coming to school will have relatively secure attachment representations or internal working models, because they have received 'good enough' care in their early years. They see themselves as good enough (lovable, safe, deserving and so on), and other people as trustworthy, responsive, caring (and so on). The pupils we are concerned with have not received good enough care. They view the world through the 'lens' of insecure attachment and so will interpret everything that goes on (or rather what they perceives goes on) through this lens. So it's very clear that the two 'lenses', or filters through which the two groups of pupils view the world are very different; hence the urgent need for translation work in our schools.

Opposite are some of the particular challenges these pupils have to face in our schools, challenges that we don't usually consider in any depth. We need to bear them in mind so that we can provide 'translation' throughout the school day, and repeatedly introduce them to the world of secure attachment.

Whilst lengthy enough, this list is not exhaustive, and reminds me again that we really mustn't simply leave these pupils to their own devices to sink or swim, only reacting when problems (inevitably) occur.

With everything that we know about our pupils' difficulties, caused by past

- Moving between different spaces, staff, expectations and learning styles
- Moving from having one class teacher to having 12 to 15 members of staff involved with them at different times through the school week
- Negotiating adolescence
- Making and keeping friends
- Managing sensory overload
- Managing stress
- Managing peer pressure
- Managing uncertainty
- Managing self-consciousness/feeling different
- Being able to express what's going on internally (psychologically and physically)
- Being able to respond appropriately and in a healthy way to their needs
- Being able to ask for help
- Resolving conflict

So, holding our pupils, their internal working model and their need for relationship 'in mind', let's now begin our journey through a school day, reflecting on how we can be and what we can do, say and create, so that we can be fully supportive of every pupil who has experienced relational trauma and loss.

Current policy directions that ignore the centrality of relationships are deeply damaging many students, causing them to physically, psychologically and emotionally withdraw from a meaningful educational experience at school ... the work of teaching is profoundly relational in nature.

(Smyth 2007, p.222)

Let the inclusive revolution begin!

relational trauma and loss – everything on this list really is a *big ask* for them. Let's never under-estimate the scale of the daily challenges they have to face. No wonder these pupils are not always completely focussed on our agenda in school! They need to know that they are not alone, and that there is at least one significant person in their school context who knows the score and who is genuinely interested in what is happening for them.

### **The 'Big Ask' – everyday challenges in school**

- Separating from their primary carer/s
- Being in a restricted space with many others
- Sharing the attention of someone important to them (parent, teacher, mentor, best friend and so on)
- Understanding the motives and intentions of school staff
- Understanding the motives and intentions of their peers
- Trusting adults at school
- Following the lead of an adult
- Relinquishing control
- Knowing they can remain connected and kept in mind, despite separation
- Being expected to organise themselves
- Being able to relax into their environment
- Being able to settle to learn
- Having an integrated view of themselves
- Taking the risks necessary in learning
- Knowing how to repair relationships when things go wrong
- Having the confidence to go off and explore
- Engaging fully with their exploratory system
- Understanding 'who' they are in terms of their identity formation
- Coping with having missing pieces in their own personal story, for example, no baby pictures, big memory blocks and gaps ...