

Queensland kindergarten learning guideline

Professional development | Resources



Children at risk: Calmer classrooms

This resource is relevant for kindergarten teachers working with children who have suffered, or are suffering, trauma from abuse or neglect. These children may be described as children at risk. While the presence of one or more risk factors is not necessarily associated with abuse or neglect, awareness of risk factors can help services to build a picture of a child's situation, in conjunction with known circumstances, observations or disclosures. Risk factors can also be mitigated by protective factors such as appropriate classroom practices. It is recommended that you allocate approximately 30 minutes to read and reflect on this resource.

Calmer classrooms

In 2007, Victoria's Child Safety Commissioner produced a valuable guide for teachers working with traumatised children of all ages.

Calmer Classrooms addresses the needs of children who have been traumatised by abuse and neglect. These children may be involved in the child protection and family support systems. Some may not be able to remain in the care of their families and are living in foster care or other forms of state care. Abuse and neglect can have a severe, long lasting impact on children's overall development, which often has the effect of reducing their capacity to concentrate and to learn. By understanding and building relationships with traumatised children, teachers can make an enormous contribution to their lives. Children who develop an attachment to their school and a love of learning will have greater resilience in the face of adversity than those who do not.

L Downey 2007, *Calmer Classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*, Child Safety Commissioner, Melbourne, p. i.

A snapshot

The snapshot overleaf, reproduced from *Calmer classrooms*, summarises the impacts of trauma on children's learning and suggests practices for teachers to support children dealing with and recovering from traumatising neglect and abuse.

More information

The full text of *Calmer classrooms* is available at:

www.ccyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf.

This and other resources produced by the Commission for Children and Young People are available at: www.ccyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/publications/orgs_resources.htm.

Resources developed by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services are available at: www.communities.qld.gov.au/gateway under Protecting children.

Additional resources to support inclusion and diversity in kindergartens are also available on the QCAA website at www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/12974.html under Professional topics > Inclusion and diversity > Children at risk.

A snapshot

If we look *behind* the acting-out behaviour of abused and neglected children we see that many are suffering from deep, long-lasting pain.

This pain comes from:

- grief and loss
- abandonment and neglect
- physical and sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- persistent anxiety
- fear or terror of the future
- depression and dispiritedness
- physical self-mutilation.

We see then that much of the behaviour of traumatised children is *pain-based*, and it is not that they *won't* behave like other children, but that they *can't*.

The impact of trauma on learning

Affect dysregulation—making children hyperaroused or dissociated

Shame—which can produce overwhelming affect dysregulation

Reduced cognitive capacity—due to early deprivation and/or affect dysregulation

Difficulties with memory—making learning harder

Language delays—reducing capacity for listening, understanding and expressing

Need for control—causing conflict with teachers and other students

Attachment difficulties—making attachment to school problematic

Poor peer relationships—making school an unpleasant experience

Unstable living situation—reducing learning, and capacity to engage with a new school

Classroom practices for dealing with traumatised children

Understand the child Understanding trauma and attachment difficulties brings compassion and empathy; understanding that the child may be developmentally younger than their chronological age will guide teaching practices.

Manage your own reactions Working with traumatised children can bring strong emotions; staying calm will help the child to calm themselves.

I see you need help with ... Help children to comply with requests. Because they don't necessarily want to please adults, helping them comply will avoid power battles.

Structure and Consistency Traumatized children often have little internal structure and need firm boundaries, rules, expectations and consequences—applied with sensitivity and calm.

Time in, not time out Traumatized children experience time out as yet more rejection, increasing their feelings of shame and worthlessness; time in keeps them engaged in a relationship.

Connect Dissociative children, who are often quiet and compliant, need gentle and consistent attempts to connect with them.

Consequences, not punishment Use natural consequences that relate to the problem behaviour and are designed to repair damaged property or damaged relationships.

Structure choices to remain in control Offer choices with humour and creativity to avoid power battles; keep the child responding to you rather than allowing them to control the interaction.

Acknowledge good decisions and choices Traumatized children often don't respond well to praise, but still need positive reinforcement for doing something well: comment on the job well done rather than intrinsic characteristics.

Support parents and carers Get to know the parents or carers; keep up good communication and don't communicate through the child. Try to be understanding and compassionate; living with a child who has trauma and attachment difficulties can be very stressful.

Maintain your role Don't be tempted to move too far out of your role. These children need caring and competent teachers.