

Handout

Risk

The more risk factors to which a child is exposed the greater their vulnerability to mental health problems. Risk does not cause mental health problems but it is cumulative and does predispose children and young people to poorer outcomes. We can minimise the number and extent of risks, and we can minimise the number of risks operating at a given time in a child's life. It may not be possible to remove the risk itself, but often an awareness of the presence of risk will change the way we understand a child's needs and respond to them. This is one example of minimising the impact of risk.

We can recognise risk within the child themselves, but also within the systems surrounding the child.

Predisposing factors in children include:

Genetic Influences

Some chromosomal syndromes are associated with particular behavioural traits; an inherited predisposition has been shown to be linked to the development of specific adult mental health disorders.

Low IQ and learning Disability

Children with learning difficulties may have communication difficulties, low self-esteem, limited life experiences and losses, all of which may contribute to a greater vulnerability to developing mental health problems. These problems may be manifest as difficult or challenging behaviour.

Parents with learning disabilities may be more likely to have their children placed in care due to concerns about their parenting abilities. Children with significant learning disabilities are more likely to be placed in care than those without disabilities due to their high level of need.

Specific development delay

Children with a range of specific developmental problems (dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder) are more likely than their peers to have emotional and behavioural problems. Low self-esteem, academic failure and frustration may underlie this. A third of children with conduct disorder have specific reading difficulties or dyslexia.

There have been connections made between conditions such as ADHD and attachment disorders. Although early years trauma is not a definitive cause of ADHD some of the behaviours may be similar and have an effect on a young person's mental health.

Communication difficulty

Language delay, English as a second language and cultural differences that are not understood or recognised, can all make the world seem a confusing and unresponsive place. This will make children, who may already be vulnerable for other reasons, feel even more isolated

Unaccompanied minors often arrive in the UK and are placed with foster families or in residential homes where their first language is not spoken. Many young people will not only be in a culture entirely different from their own but will be surrounded by people with whom they cannot verbally communicate with.

Difficult temperament

Children are born with different temperaments, which determine how easily they adapt and settle to routines and deal with stress. Children's temperaments are modified by their experiences and by how well adults are able to help modulate any distress. Those babies who are sensitive, volatile or unable to cope with change remain vulnerable in later life.

Physical illness

Children who are often ill miss time from activities that other children do, at play and school. They may have to undergo uncomfortable or unpleasant treatment; they may miss out on developing friendships. Not being able to attend school regularly may mean getting behind with their work; parents too, can become over-protective. Children with chronic illness and disability, particularly those which involve the neurological system (epilepsy, cerebral palsy) are particularly vulnerable in this way.

Children with significant physical disabilities are more likely to be in care than those without due to their high level of care needs.

Academic failure

School is a big part of a child's life and not being able to cope at school will have a huge impact. School teachers and other adults may not understand why a child is having problems and may not provide the right sort of help; other children usually know and may tease. The child may feel to blame – no-one likes doing things they feel they are not good at. School ethos is important – the school which truly values aspects of the child, other than academic success, can limit this negative experience for the child. Schools that have high expectations (that ask a lot of children) and strong supports (that give a lot to children) have been shown to support good mental health.eir children's emotional needs.

Looked After Young People often experience disruptions in their education and there have been concerns about improving the academic achievement of Looked After Young People remains high on the agenda. Disruptions in the family home and in subsequent placements can have a significant effect on a young person's education.

Low self-esteem

This can have a very powerful influence on the way children approach and cope with the world they live in. Low self-esteem can affect the way children deal with new challenges and can influence the way others, including peers, respond.

We know that many children in care have low self-esteem due to experiences both prior to and entering the care system. Leaving the family home and placement breakdown can significantly affect a young person's self-esteem as feelings of rejection escalate.

Predisposing factors in families include:

Overt parental conflict

When parents are caught up in tense, hostile and angry battles with each other, it's very difficult for them to focus on their children's emotional needs. Sometimes, children become involved in the battles, either directly or as pawns in the confrontations between the adults. Children find it very difficult to understand what is happening and may well come to feel that the arguments are their fault in some way. They also become very frightened and confused by domestic violence.

Children living in violent or abusive households are extremely vulnerable and emotional abuse can have very significant long-term effects on mental health. Some children are placed in care due to these family experiences.

Family breakdown

One in three marriages ends in divorce and co-habiting parents are even more likely to separate, so many children have to cope with the distress, disappointment and sadness that this brings. For many couples, after a separation, it proves to be very hard to continue to act as parents towards the children, so that parenting falls on the shoulders of one the parents, most commonly, the mother. The parent who moves away may gradually disappear from the child's life, as might other relatives; the child may come to believe that they were in some way responsible for this. After a separation, there may be other disruptions and uncertainties; many single parents have to cope with living on a reduced income.

In addition family breakdown prior to entering the care system, this is often an experience that young people experience repeatedly when placed in care. Children in multiple placements or placements where there is a high turnover of staff experience loss of different adults over and over again and this can have a significant affect on a young person's ability to develop secure trusting relationships with adults and carers.

Inconsistent or unclear discipline

Children need to know what is expected to them. The boundaries their carers create help to give them a sense of security and containment. When discipline is unclear or inconsistent, children do not know what the limits are and may become bewildered, confused or anxious as a result. Conduct problems are associated with inconsistent parenting styles.

In research, Children in Care have stated that inconsistent rules and boundaries in placements is one of the things they would like to change. In residential care young people spend time with different adults all who may interpret rules and boundaries slightly differently. It is imperative that there is clear leadership around discipline and that young people regularly partake in discussions with adults to ensure that all are clear about expectations and consequences.

Hostile and rejecting relationships

It is difficult for children to develop a sense of their own worth if their relationship with one of their main carers is hostile and rejecting. At its most extreme, a child may be the victim of emotional abuse, seen as the family scapegoat, the cause of many of the family's difficulties, and offered little or no support, encouragement or affection.

Regardless of why a child has entered into the care system, they may feel rejection from their family as they are no longer living together. If one or more of the child's siblings remain in the family this feeling of rejection may be even more significant. Many children have multiple placements and each one of these can feel like rejection for a young person.

Failure to adapt to children's changing developmental needs

As children grow and develop, their needs change. Not all families are able to respond in a flexible way to the particular needs of their children. Adolescent children can be particularly challenging for some parents.

Some children in care have quite complex needs that carers might find hard to meet. It is important for young people to be in the right placement which is designed to meet the needs of the child who is living there. Historically foster care has been perceived as the best option and whilst this may be appropriate for many children and young people others have stated that residential care is where they would prefer to live. Residential care may also be an appropriate option for a very traumatised child whose needs are too complex to be looked after in a family environment.

Abuse – physical, sexual, neglect and/or emotional

Children who have been exposed to abuse are extremely vulnerable to developing mental health problems. This is particularly marked where the abuse has occurred within their family – their trust in the adults who care for them is damaged and can affect every aspect of their lives.

Many children who are in the care are there because of the abuse that they have experienced.

Parental psychiatric illness

A parent suffering from psychiatric illness may go through times when they are unable to meet their children's needs, particularly if they require periods in hospital. During these times children may be worried or confused by what is happening, embarrassed about unusual behaviour, have to take up a carer role for a parent or siblings or both and will be concerned about the reactions of their neighbours or friends. Families in this situation may have financial and housing problems which add further to their difficulties. The stigma associated with psychiatric illness and the discrimination and bullying families can experience will also have an impact on the children. Children often fear that they will go on to develop a psychiatric illnesses themselves despite their being no evidence of a genetic component and this is compounded where adults are reluctant to discuss the parental illness with the children.

Children with a parent who is in hospitalised or significantly mentally unwell may spend time in care if there is no other adult available to look after them.

Parental criminality, alcoholism, drug abuse and personality disorder

All of these factors can make it difficult for parents to provide a stable and secure family life for the children.

Parents with significant drug or alcohol use may not be able to meet the needs of their child and this child may subsequently end up in care. Whilst some parents manage to look after their children whilst using drugs or alcohol regularly it can significantly affect parenting.

Death and loss – including loss of friendships

Disrupted childhoods often lead to cumulative losses. Whilst children need to learn how to cope with loss and bereavement, these experiences can be very traumatic – especially for children who are already vulnerable in some way. Repeated moves may be associated with loss of familiar people, places and things.

Children in Care have experienced loss in one form or another. Some children may still have contact with their families and others may not see them at all. When children move from home to a placement or to multiple placements they not only experience loss of parents or carers but also friends and other significant people in their networks. This might be a teacher, a neighbour, a sports instructor... Children in Care are far more likely than many other children to experience repeated moves from school, home and their communities.

Predisposing factors in the wider environment include:

Socio-economic disadvantage

Living in poverty is a powerful risk factor for children's mental health difficulties. Children in families where both parents are long term unemployed have rates of mental disorder two and a half times the average.

Homelessness

Families who do not have the stability of a home find it very difficult to provide a secure and predictable life for their children. Parents in this situation are likely to become tense and preoccupied; meeting the family's basic material needs presents a major challenge, and relationships within the family are likely to come under considerable pressure.

Disaster, accidents, war and other overwhelming events

Mean that the usual structures and supports are disrupted, possibly over long periods of time. Where the adults are able to protect children from the most difficult and most frightening aspects of these experiences, children can be remarkably resilient but in extreme situations this may not be possible. Children who were already vulnerable before the disaster appear to be most at risk.

Unaccompanied minors are often fleeing situations of disaster, war and violence and may have witnessed overwhelming disturbing events. Children may have seen family and friends tortured and are now living long distances away from other family and friends.

Discrimination

Children can experience discrimination amongst their peers if they appear to be different in any way from the majority because of race, colour, faith, culture, disability, sexual orientation. Racial and cultural discrimination and abuse affects whole families and communities and presents a serious and powerful risk factor for children's emotional wellbeing. The stigma surrounding mental health problems is another aspect of discrimination and one that can prevent young people seeking help and disclosing how they are feeling.

Children in Care may face discrimination about their circumstances. Living in a foster placement, residential placement or other setting away from family can isolate young people from their peers. (See YoungMinds Stigma work).

Other significant life events

Life events are stressful. The more disturbing life events we experience, the more vulnerable we are to developing mental health problems. What is significant will be different for different young people. For those who are already exposed to a cluster of risks events that may seem small to others can have major significance. All young people are different and need to be understood and treated as individuals.

