

Aggression in Children who have experienced Trauma

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World Awareness for Children in Trauma (WACIT)

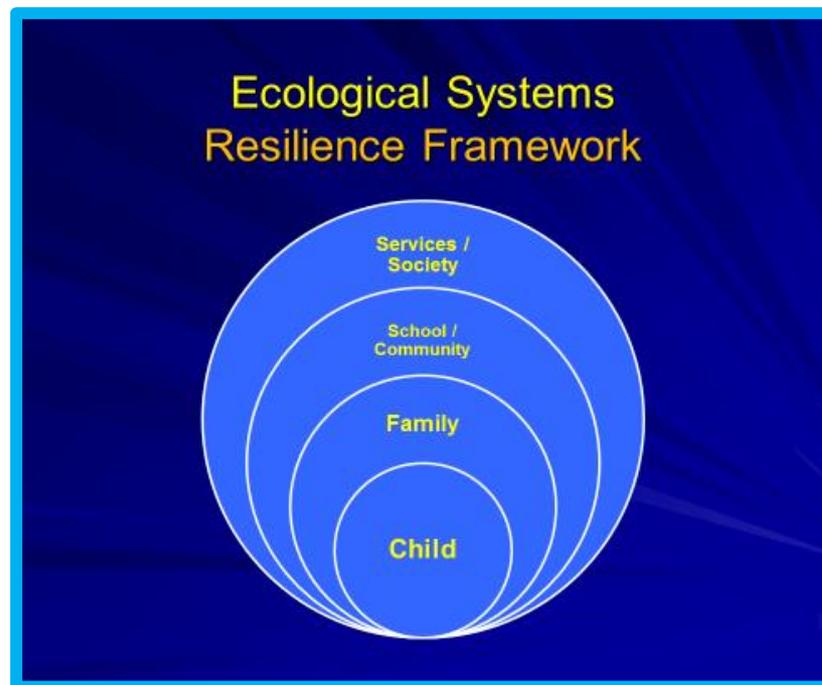
A child's frequent aggressive behaviour towards adults and peers could be more than the child pushing the boundaries.

Aggression in a child could be an indicator of their traumatic past and adverse present that they may be facing. It can, therefore, be a maladaptive coping mechanism for children when they are potentially confused about their feelings. Consequently, to handle a child's aggressive behaviour, attention also needs to be given to the child's past trauma, with appropriate support being available in that context.

Mental wellbeing



This is the optimum situation for a child and is an indicator of social, physical and emotional wellness. Mental wellbeing equips a child and young person to develop, learn and achieve their potential, as well as cope with life stressors, as they prepare for adulthood. This is influenced by the wider context in which they live in.



Although aggression as such is not necessarily a mental health condition, it usually indicates lack of mental wellbeing and, among children who have experienced trauma, this could be understood in terms of emotional dysregulation.

First, let's define what we mean by Trauma.

A traumatic event is an incident that causes physical, emotional or psychological harm. This can be as a result of one (single trauma) or multiple events (multiple or complex trauma), or of recurrent adverse conditions that cause stress.

Examples of trauma that children can experience

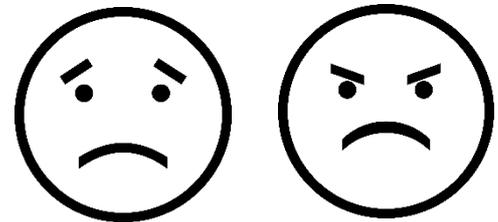
- witnessing violence
- neglect
- emotional abuse
- physical abuse
- sexual abuse

Emotional dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation is the inability to control or regulate emotional responses.

Emotional dysregulation can be a consequence of trauma that a child has experienced. This emotional dysregulation can show itself in children's behaviour through:

- Difficulty in understanding and relating emotions to others.
- Regulating own emotions
- Intense feelings of shame and rage
- Delayed or patchy development



Aggressive behaviour can thus be an expression of a child's difficulty to regulate their emotional responses.



- Overwhelmed, out of control
- Shouting, anti-social behaviour, hostility
- Both verbal and physical

It is important to note that children who occasionally get upset and angry are not necessarily a cause for concern. The behaviours that we are looking for include the child showing aggression on a regular basis and in situations that do not warrant such a disproportionate reaction.

Children's emotional responses can be triggered by their past experiences. If they have been threatened or attacked in the past, they could act in an aggressive manner when they perceive they are in a situation that is possibly similar to their past. This perception of threat would thus be influenced by their past.

Case scenario

A child who has experienced violence by being beaten by a parent is likely to respond aggressively when told off even for a minor reason, in order to protect themselves from a repeat of their past experience.



Trauma

Adverse life conditions
such as poverty

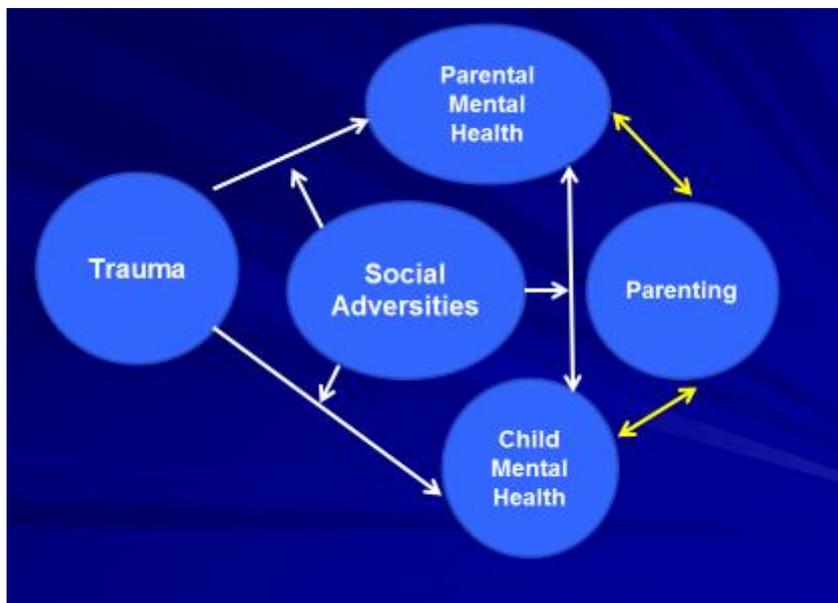
A specific event



Altered neural
systems

Emotional
dysregulation

The impact of adverse experiences on child mental health



Close observation and monitoring, along with sharing impressions with caregivers and other professionals may identify other signs which can help understand a child's aggression in the context of their traumatic experiences, rather than just learned behaviours.

- Sadness, crying, irritability
- Nightmares
- Avoidance of school or other social situations
- Attention-seeking or controlling behaviour
- Impaired concentration
- Changes in their sleep, eating or other routines

The continuing effect of trauma is due to the children's difficulty in understanding their emotions and the emotions of those around them. Consequently, they struggle to cope with their thoughts and emotions, like feelings of shame and rage. Often these stem from the child not understanding or coming to terms with the traumatic situations that they have been faced with. For example, in a case of physical and/or sexual abuse, the child can be made to feel responsible by the perpetrator, even though they are the victim. This can lead to a high level of confusion, self-blame, fear, and poor self-image.



The next step: Helping the child

After identifying that the child's aggressive behaviour is their coping mechanism for past trauma, the next step is looking at what methods and strategies can be implemented to deal with their behaviour and help them to overcome it.

Attention needs to be given to both the child's past and how that might be affecting their behaviour, and the present in how adult responses or other factors reinforce these behaviours. It is useful to have a framework in planning support, although this will need to be tailored to each child and their individual circumstances and needs.

A child that has been abandoned	Consistency with carers, so they do not feel alone and that they are being rejected again.
A child that has experienced physical abuse	When being told off, they know that they are still cared for and loved - it is just the particular behaviour that is not approved.



Strategies to target aggressive behaviours in the context of trauma

Ensure that the child does not feel lonely or rejected, as this will confirm their perception of re-experiencing trauma and abandonment, which would maintain and even intensify their aggressive behaviour.

Remain connected with the child. Not necessarily physical contact (although this is comforting too), but ensuring that they know they have your support and you are consistent.

When talking to them about their behaviour or other issues, use developmentally appropriate language. Remember that children who suffer trauma often have delays in their development, i.e. you may need to address them as a younger child. Statements not directed at them can be less threatening such as "it can be hard to manage our feelings when another person hurts us".

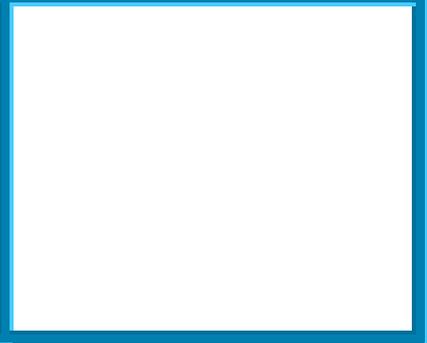
Helping the child to understand their feelings will mean that they will gradually become more able to recognize and deal with them. Developing such capacity to regulate their emotions will thus lead to the reduction of aggressive behaviours.

Acknowledge the child's difficulty to express their feelings and encourage them to do so. Remain mindful of boundaries between comfort and therapy, i.e. the purpose here is to better understand and recognize their emotions, rather than re-process the traumatic experience.

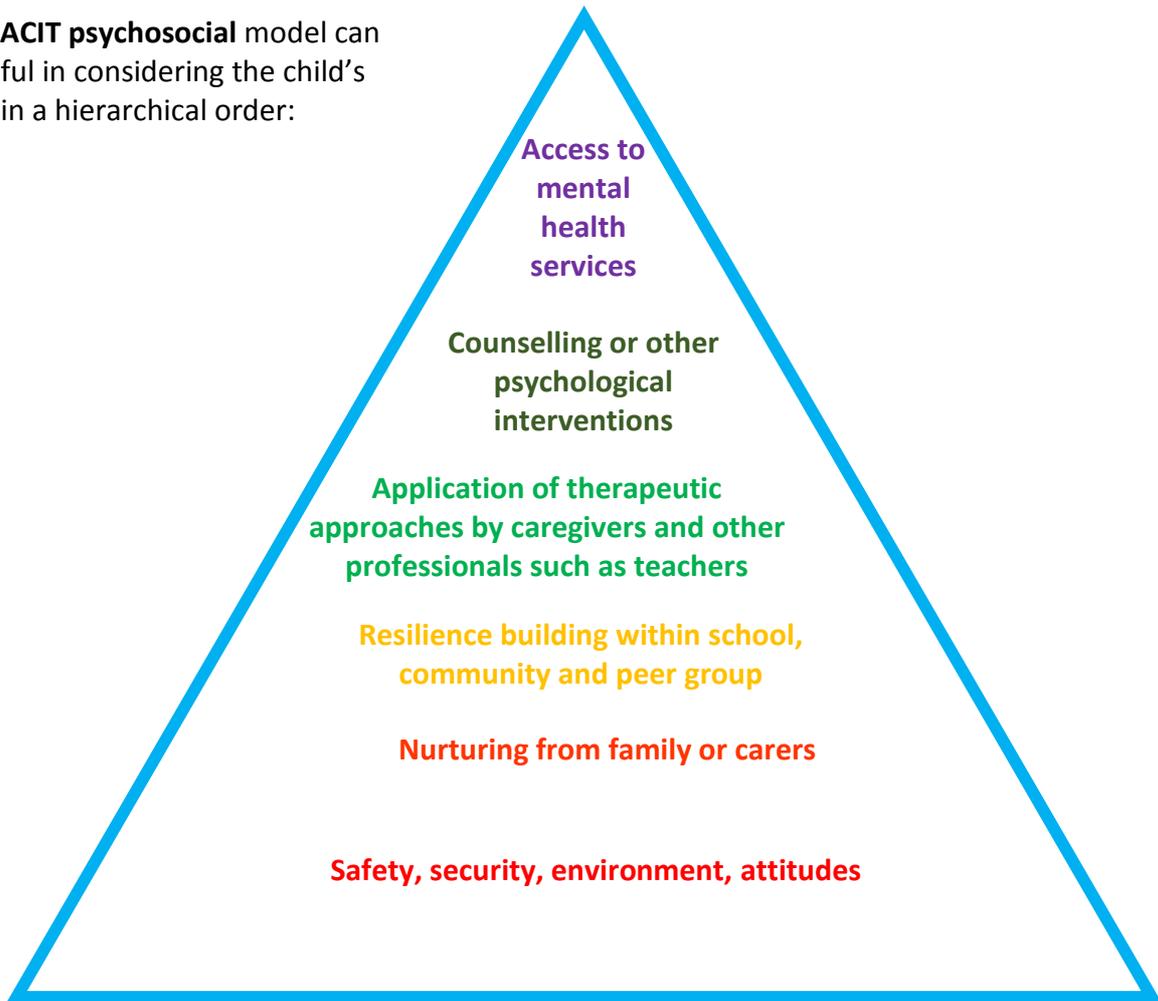
Helping the child feel safe, will make it easier for them to engage with their emotions. This can reduce their feelings of loneliness and rejection, and further increase the feeling of safety which can decrease the rage. In that way, they can start breaking the vicious cycle of trauma-dysregulated emotions-aggression.

Help the child develop trusting relationships, and gradually replace their past trauma with rewarding experiences and adaptive coping strategies.

Positive new experiences need to be gained within the family/home, school, peer group and community. This will require close collaboration between caregivers and professionals across all settings.



The **WACIT psychosocial** model can be useful in considering the child's needs in a hierarchical order:



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