



About me:

Whilst studying for a masters in psychology, I have balanced working for PRICE Training alongside working in a residential children's home. Through this work, I have been able to experience first-hand the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of the children and young people we care for.

Millie Tabram

It is important that we view the COVID-19 pandemic as a potential traumatic event for children

COVID-19; stressful, prolonged and unpredictable, throwing all normal life and routine into the wind. Routines provide a great sense of security to children and keep unpredictability to a minimum. Uncertainty on a daily basis can cause a sense of emotional unrest or instability for both children and adults. Disrupted schooling has prevented extra-curricular activities as well as the opportunity to meet up with friends and families to name but a few; It is only natural for the stress caused by this pandemic to manifest itself in children's behaviours.

For many children and young people, the pandemic is likely to activate a [danger response](#) in the brain, which in turn increases stress; even more so in children with historical trauma, who's anxiety responses are often triggered by an overall climate of [uncertainty and concern](#). Given the global unrest of the last 12 months, the pandemic may be causing an overdrive of fight, flight or freeze response in young people with a history of trauma. [This may display itself](#) for example through heightened behaviour, sleep disturbances, becoming withdrawn, disassociation and/or hypervigilance.

"It is only natural for the stress caused by this pandemic to manifest itself in children's behaviours."

"...the pandemic may be causing an overdrive of fight, flight or freeze response in young people with a history of trauma."

It is important as care practitioners that we recognise this trauma response and are adaptive in our approaches. We may have to dig deeper into our toolboxes and adapt tools we already have in order to respond to the world we are in, whilst abiding by local lockdown restrictions. The pandemic has forced us to become dynamic and think outside the box when it comes to supporting children and young people. For example, organising regular board games, quiz or movie nights as a home. These help to restore routine and stability into the lives of young people. Such activities can help limit device screen-time as well as increase social integration within the family and home; something which previously happened naturally through offsite activities.

“Unpredictability on a daily basis can cause a sense of emotional unrest or instability for both children and adults.”

[Collin-Vezina, Brend and Beeman](#) argue that now is a key time to be emphasising trauma informed care (TIC) within our staff groups. TIC involves a broad understanding of traumatic stress reactions and common responses to trauma. Those of you who have completed a PRICE Training course will be familiar with this concept in relation to functions of behaviour. [The Institute for Trauma Informed Care](#) identifies five key principles to TIC; safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment.

“We need to help young people to make sense of the changing world around them.”

The pandemic may leave children fearing for their safety; as practitioners we must provide safe spaces for children and young people. Safety can be achieved by maintaining daily routines and ensuring safe environments free from hostility, fear and violence whilst in our care. At times of national anxiety, we must attempt not to carry this through into homelife and it is important children and young people feel they can trust those around them.

“The physical and emotional safety of clients must be prioritised.”

We must strive to provide clear and consistent information whenever we can. The unpredictable nature of the pandemic and ever-changing restrictions has understandably made this a challenge; you may find children and young people blaming you as the caregiver for changes in guidelines and legislation impacting upon their plans. Children who have experienced trauma may not be able to take in large pieces of information so regular informal chats can feed positive and accurate messages that may assist in alleviating anxiety.

“We must use our knowledge of the children we look after as well as the relationship we have with them to ensure our approach is meaningful and particular to them.”

We have all lost our mastery of choice and may feel at times that the government's guidance is a restriction of liberty. More so than adults, children and young people may find it harder to rationalise the lockdown measures that may invoke for us all anxiety and a sense of loss. It is again important to respond to the children in our care as individuals; for example, a young person who has experienced abuse and has experienced being locked in a bedroom alone for periods of time is at greater risk of re-traumatisation in the current climate.

"Choice is a major element that has been taken from us all during the pandemic."

It is important that collaboration is maintained between staff, service users and their families during the pandemic. New technologies such as Zoom can help us to overcome some of the physical barriers the pandemic has put upon us. In fact, the pandemic has provided us all with an opportunity to re-think what we do and how we do it. Given what we have learnt, it may be a child or young person may be more likely to engage in a review meeting if they can do so from their bedroom or another room via Zoom.

"The pandemic has given us an opportunity to rethink collaboration for service users."

It is likely that individuals aren't visiting places they typically went to learn and build their skills, such as football practice on a Sunday morning or dance lessons after school. However, we must seize the opportunity it has given us - time. Now more than ever before, we have an opportunity to spend quality time with children and share experiences that provide them with new skills and build their confidence. Something as small as learning to play a new game or for older children, learning to do the laundry provides a great opportunity for independence and empowerment.

"In a locked-in, shut-down world, it is important that we are still empowering young people to build the skills they need for life."

In summary, the events of the last year have been unsettling to us all, but what is important is that we harness this as an opportunity for change and hold trauma informed care at the heart of our practice. In this entirely unique situation, we must stay aware of the effect of this pandemic on young people, not only now but in the transition out of restrictions and in years to come.

"The pandemic has forced us to become dynamic and think outside the box when it comes to supporting children and young people."