The importance of early intervention for children who experience trauma through abuse and neglect

Dr Katrina Lines
Executive Director of Services
• What is Act for Kids?
• What is child abuse and neglect?
• How big is the problem?
• What are the effects of abuse and neglect?
• Why does abuse and neglect affect development?
• What are the long-term effects?
• What interventions work and why?
Act for Kids

- Act for Kids works to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect
- Established in 1988 as The Abused Child Trust
- Services in 21 sites in Qld, SA and NSW
Our services

• We believe that it’s not enough to treat the effects of abuse and neglect
• Our services are aimed at helping the broadest range of children we can access

Specialised integrated therapy for trauma arising from abuse and neglect

Early intervention family support services before things go too far

Preventative programs such as awareness raising, protective behaviours for 5 year olds etc.
Child abuse and neglect

• Child abuse and neglect is defined in the QLD Child Protection Act 1999 as “any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child’s physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing.”

• It is typically categorised as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect.
Child protection in Australia 2013–14

1 in 37 children received child protection services.

55,067 children were on care and protection orders.

Indigenous children were 7 times as likely as non-Indigenous children to receive child protection services.

Emotional abuse was the most common type of abuse.

Children from areas of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to be the subject of a substantiation.

9 in 10 children in out-of-home care were in relative/kinship care or foster care.

Nearly half of foster care households (49%) had multiple children placed.

Rates of children in substantiations, on care and protection orders, and in out-of-home care have increased since 2009–10.


For more information visit: www.aihw.gov.au
Child abuse and neglect

- In 2013-14 in Australia:
  - 304,094 reports were made to child protection authorities
  - 40,844 children experienced substantiated abuse or neglect
  - 1 in 5 children were the subject of multiple reports
Child abuse and neglect

- Children under 12 months were most likely to experience abuse.
- Almost half of all children admitted to CP orders were under 4 years.
- Of the 11,085 children admitted to out-of-home care during 2013-14, 4,924 (44%) were under the age of 5.
- More than 65% of adults would not report abuse or neglect (NAPCAN, 2010).
Effects of abuse and neglect

- Delayed cognitive development
  - Speech and language
  - Attention, concentration
  - Learning, problem solving
  - Memory

- Impaired social and emotional functioning
  - Poor self regulation of behaviour
  - Poor understanding of emotions
  - Difficulty developing relationships

- Physical problems
  - Sensory and motor problems
  - Physical illness, failure to thrive
Effects of abuse and neglect

Healthy Brain
This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.

An Abused Brain
This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian orphan, who was institutionalized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.
Brain development

• The brain develops from the **bottom up** and is undeveloped at birth
• The brain develops in a **social** environment
• The more a neural system is activated the more the system changes to reflect the pattern of activation
• The brain makes associations between signals in the outside world and patterns of neural activation
Brain development

• The neural systems which control the stress response also control reward, procreation, reproduction, social-affiliation and communication

• They are inter-related and share the same networks

• They are all **SOCIALLY MEDIATED**
The nature of love

Harry Harlow - The Nature of Love  https://youtu.be/___O60TYPOIgC4
Classic papers in psychology  http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Harlow/love.htm
The nature of love

• From 1990s research started to link brain development with early social/emotional experiences, in particular, the attachment relationship between child and caregiver

• Maternal love results in right brain limbic and autonomic activation (Schore, 2003)
  – Develops regulatory hubs in sequence in first year of life
  – Amygdala, insula, cingulate, orbitofrontal cortex
The nature of love

• Mutual love when infant 2-3 months
  – Reciprocal ‘face to face’ interactions key to regulation of brain development (Porges, 2014)
  – “connectedness” – biological imperative
    • The ability to mutually (synchronously, symbiotically and reciprocally) regulate physiological and behavioural state
    • Provides the neurobiological mechanism to link social behaviour and both mental and physical health (Porges, 2014)
Connectedness

Ed Tronick – Still Face Experiment  https://youtu.be/apzXGEBZht0
Connectedness

- Responsive to child’s needs
- Face to face interactions
- Vocalisation/prosody
- Posture, gestures
- All cue safety or danger
- Allows for co-regulation of physiological state, optimal environment for brain development
Child abuse and neglect

• *Relational* trauma
• Disruption of connectedness
  – Lack of healthy reciprocal co-regulation
  – Distorts, retards, damages brain development
  – Distorts social awareness
  – Social engagement behaviours replaced by defensive reactions
    • Mediated by SNS responses → flight, fight, freeze
Child abuse and neglect

- Polyvagal theory (Porges) – nervous system activation moderates “neuroception” and dictates behaviour
- Perception of safety and risk distorted based on experience over time and changes in brain function
  - Safe – can engage socially, play, be loving
  - Danger – fight or flight – activation of SNS
  - Life threat – freeze, shut down, immobilize, dissociate
Child abuse and neglect

• Parents/caregivers who may present a high risk to infants and children
  – Failure to connect and meet needs
    • Mental health issues
    • Substance use
    • Experienced trauma themselves as children
  – Fear and life threat
    • Physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional terror
Case study

- Jake 6yrs, Sean 4yrs when referred
- Parents separated 3yrs previously when Sean was around 1yr old, Jake lived with Dad and Sean lived with Mum
- Mum wasn’t coping with Sean after his birth
  - Neglected his needs or used “discipline” strategies like biting him
  - She went to CS to ask for help, they removed Sean and placed him with Dad
- Boys removed from Dad’s care when Sean was 3.5yrs old
  - Hospital notified when Sean had to be seen due to oesophageal burns
Case study

• With Dad the children experienced:
  – Physical abuse
    • Made to drink laundry detergent as a discipline method after they made a mess at breakfast
    • The boys were urinated on and made to watch their father setting animals on fire and other cruelty to animals
    • Sean was thrown in the rubbish bin
  – Sexual abuse – Dad and his friends perpetrated horrendous acts of abuse and filmed it
  – Emotional abuse was ongoing
    • Threatened to throw them in front of a train whenever they went out – became terrified of trains
Case study

• At referral Jake presented with:
  – Frequent dissociation at school and home
  – No sense of identity, would mimic Sean’s behaviour – couldn’t differentiate between himself and Sean
  – Extremely withdrawn
  – Minor speech language problems, but significant cognitive and emotional issues
Case study

• At referral Sean presented with:
  – Extreme separation anxiety when apart from carers
  – Nightmares
  – Enuresis and soiling
  – Intense outbursts
  – Sensory sensitivities around noise and movement
  – Poor speech and language abilities
### Mental state

Bruce Perry

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Impact over time

- Fail to develop to full potential
- Poor literacy and numeracy
- Poor health
- Substance misuse
- Mental health issues
- Lifelong relationship issues
- Domestic and family violence
- Intergenerational trauma
- Criminal behaviour
- Unemployment
Relationship to health

• Meta-analyses indicate significantly increased odds of a range of mental and physical health issues
  – Depression, anxiety, drug use, suicide attempts
  – Sexually transmitted disease and risky sexual behaviour
  – Chronic illness and lifestyle risk factors

• Dose effects
• Age of trauma effects
• Intergenerational trauma
Intervention

• Earlier the better
  – Neural plasticity, dose effects etc

• Conceptualise interventions in terms of the trauma and its impact
  – Relational
  – Developmental
  – Intergenerational
Intervention

• Therapy *process* as intervention
  – Relational process – eye contact, smiling, reciprocity, synchronicity, mirroring

• Facilitate self-regulation skills
  • Understanding and awareness of own emotions
  • Ability to adjust behaviour and manage intense emotions
  • Ability to recognise other’s emotions and respond appropriately

• Facilitate neural pathway development (particularly in children)
  • Perry’s work on rhythm and patterning/scheduling
Intervention

• Ecological
  – Foster positive relational interventions across spheres of influence
  – Psychoeducation about the impacts of trauma and resulting behaviours

• Initially more effective to focus on self-regulation rather than on any specific therapeutic content
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*Bruce Perry*
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Act for Kids intervention data

- Sample of children referred to an integrated therapy program
- Individual psychology, speech and occupational therapy
- Group programs
- Early education program
- 113 children, average age 6 years, 53% male, 47% female
Act for Kids intervention data

Abuse Experienced

- Sexual Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Neglect
- Emotional Abuse

Abuse Experienced

Percentage
Developmental Impacts

- Speech
- Rec Language
- Exp Language
- Fine Motor
- Gross Motor
- Vis-Percept
- Soc-Emot-Beh

Percentage

Act for Kids intervention data
Statistically significant improvements in rule breaking, internalising, externalising, feeling happy and overall competence at school (CBCL)
Summary

- A report is made about a child every 2 minutes. Every 13 minutes one of those reports is substantiated.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented.
- Child abuse and neglect negatively impacts all areas of development and without intervention has lifelong negative impacts.
- Child abuse is relational trauma and interventions should be conceptualised relationally and focus initially on self-regulation skills.
- More than 65% of adults wouldn’t report child abuse.
Thank you!

• To the Mental Health Academy for organising the Mental Health Super Summit and supporting Act for Kids in such a significant way.

• To all the presenters who have contributed their time and expertise.

• To everyone who has subscribed and supported this amazing fundraising event.