
Handling Disclosures: Children and Trauma

A guide for teachers and school staff

Written by David Trickey, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Anna Freud Centre

What teachers may encounter

Children who have experienced trauma will have short-term reactions — struggling in various ways before bouncing back. For some, however, their experiences will have been overwhelming and may have a lasting negative psychological impact. As a teacher, you are well placed to notice changes in children and see whether they are gradually improving, staying the same, or deteriorating.

Warning signs to watch for

The children who are easiest to spot are those who are hyperaroused — lashing out at peers or staff. But their overt behaviour is not always recognised as a response to trauma. The ones who are harder to spot keep more inside:

- Children who cannot concentrate because they are preoccupied scanning for danger — a noise in the corridor, voices nearby — may appear distracted or disengaged rather than distressed.
- Children who have been traumatised are highly attuned to potential threats. Their bodies can react automatically to perceived dangers without conscious awareness or control.
- Some children become increasingly anxious, more worried about more things. Previously confident children may become timid and nervous.
- Some will become very low in mood — quiet, seemingly pre-occupied, not disrupting the lesson. If you could see what was happening in their minds, you might be more concerned about them than about the ones who are impossible to ignore.
- These children may believe they have no friends, that others hate them, that they are worthless, and that life is hopeless. They may be experiencing intrusive images of traumatic events that keep returning the harder they try to push them away.

What you can do

You may not be a therapist, but you are superbly placed to be therapeutic.

- Watch for children who are struggling. Simply asking how they are can make a real difference — just having a safe adult who is looking out for them matters.
- Some children will not be truthful about their difficulties to their parents or carers, but may speak more openly to a trusted adult at school. You are not expected to solve the problems they share — simply listening and being curious can have a tremendous impact.
- Do not dismiss concerns too quickly. If a child is worried about something, listen and be curious. Normalise their feelings ("a lot of children are more worried than usual") and gently explore ("tell me more about that").

How children might disclose

Some children will pick very specific moments to tell you about their worries or experiences. These moments might suit them much more than they suit you. When they are with you in a corridor, they might drop some concerning information and leave it with you — it may make them feel better to get it off their chest, but it leaves you with decisions to make about what to do.

Safeguarding

Your school will have its own safeguarding procedure. The safety of the child is always the most important matter — if a child is in immediate danger, call 999. Always know who your school's Safeguarding Lead is, and refer back to them or your line manager if you have any concerns at any point.

Getting additional help

There is a limit to what teachers can and should offer. Knowing what comes next for children who are struggling is important. Many schools have mental health provision on site; others have access to external services; and for some children a referral to CAMHS will be necessary. Provision varies by school and local area.

Self-care for school staff

You are no use to your pupils if you are so exhausted that you cannot think clearly. Supporting children with traumatic experiences can take a toll — and some of you will have had similar experiences of your own. In order to be genuinely useful, both emotionally and professionally, it is crucial that you look after yourself too.

What this looks like varies for each person — regular mindfulness or meditation, exercise, time outdoors, or hobbies that protect against burnout. Working out what strategies help you is a crucial first step. Further resources are available at mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk