

Identity and Belonging

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet about complex trauma and identity and belonging

Complex trauma in childhood often occurs as a result of repeated abuse, violence or neglect which continues over a long period of time.

The victim is often young and dependent on their caregivers for safety, nurture and protection. When children are not safe or protected their development can be severely affected. They can be so focussed on survival they may not be able to explore and learn (Perry, 2009).

Depending on the ages and stages at which this occurs, the child, adolescent and the adult they become may struggle to function day to day. Their sense of themselves, and their capacity to regulate their levels of arousal, emotions and behaviour can also be significantly affected (Howell & Itzkowitz 2016). It is important to understand this when engaging with a person who has experienced trauma in their childhood. In the context of childhood trauma their challenges make sense.

We have grappled with philosophical questions about identity for thousands of years. It is more than how we look and

sound. Identity dictates how we navigate the world. Although the nature versus nurture debate implies that both influence the outcome, our biological constitution partially informs a second process, as well. This second process of socialisation is how the world responds to us and we respond to it. It is a major component of how we develop and grow.

As we grow up we are exposed to events which influence our core beliefs. We develop and then hold these core beliefs about:

- Ourselves
- Other people
- The world



Core beliefs then become a framework by which we process our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviours. They are the lens through which we interpret our world. We often hold on tightly to our core beliefs, even if they distress us or seem counter-productive.

Once we have our core beliefs, new events can influence them. They might reinforce them, or they might cause us to question them.

Developing a sense of self and the capacity for healthy relationships

- 1** From birth, experience actively shapes and formulates a child's developing self. This involves complex interactions between the child and their family within their home, community, culture and society. A child's interactions with their caregivers, particularly emotional interactions, however play a significant role.
- 2** It is important for the child's caregivers to be attuned to the child and to mirror or model a reflection of healthy relating. This forms a model for positive relationships for the child with themselves and others. This occurs within the broader social context with outcomes for a child depending on individual, family and social factors (Toth & Cicchetti, 2010.)
- 3** High levels of risk exposure at the child, family, or household level often reflect broader socio-political influences. Differences in socioeconomic, political and cultural context mean that power, financial resources and standing in the community are unequally distributed (VicHealth, 2013, which, in turn, also impact a developing child.)
- 4** Healthy child development is promoted by emotional and physical security, consistent affection, validation, support and guidance to enable a sense of autonomy (Cozolino, 2012; Shonkoff, 2012.)
- 5** When a caregiver has their own experiences of trauma and victimisation (Bromfield et al., 2010.) they may face challenges in their own lives, and in meeting their child's needs, particularly their emotional needs. This means that they might not connect securely with their infants, and child, of different ages. This in turn can affect the way a child attaches to their caregiver and to others over time. This can also mean that the child can find it harder to manage stress over their lives.

