Calmer Classrooms - a snapshot

If we look behind the acting-out behaviour of abused and neglected children we see that many are suffering from deep, long-lasting pain. This pain comes from:

- grief and loss
- abandonment and neglect
- physical and sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- persistent anxiety
- fear or terror of the future
- depression and dispiritedness
- physical self-mutilation.

We see then that much of the behaviour of traumatised children is pain-based, and it is not that they won’t behave like other children, but that they can’t.

The impact of trauma on learning

| Affect dysregulation—making children hyperaroused or dissociated |
| Shame—which can produce overwhelming affect dysregulation |
| Reduced cognitive capacity—due to early deprivation and/or affect dysregulation |
| Difficulties with memory—making learning harder |
| Language delays—reducing capacity for listening, understanding and expressing |
| Need for control—causing conflict with teachers and other students |
| Attachment difficulties—making attachment to school problematic |
| Poor peer relationships—making school an unpleasant experience |
| Unstable living situation—reducing learning, and capacity to engage with a new school |
Classroom practices for dealing with traumatised children

**Understand the child**  Understanding trauma and attachment difficulties brings compassion and empathy; understanding that the child may be developmentally younger than their chronological age will guide teaching practices.

**Manage your own reactions**  Working with traumatised children can bring strong emotions; staying calm will help the child to calm themselves.

**I see you need help with ...**  Help children to comply with requests. Because they don’t necessarily want to please adults, helping them comply will avoid power battles.

**Structure and Consistency**  Traumatised children often have little internal structure and need firm boundaries, rules, expectations and consequences—applied with sensitivity and calm.

**Time in, not time out**  Traumatised children experience time out as yet more rejection, increasing their feelings of shame and worthlessness; time in keeps them engaged in a relationship.

**Connect**  Dissociative children, who are often quiet and compliant, need gentle and consistent attempts to connect with them.

**Consequences, not punishment**  Use natural consequences that relate to the problem behaviour and are designed to repair damaged property or damaged relationships.

**Structure choices to remain in control**  Offer choices with humour and creativity to avoid power battles; keep the child responding to you rather than allowing them to control the interaction.

**Acknowledge good decisions and choices**  Traumatised children often don’t respond well to praise, but still need positive reinforcement for doing something well: comment on the job well done rather than intrinsic characteristics.

**Support parents and carers**  Get to know the parents or carers; keep up good communication and don’t communicate through the child. Try to be understanding and compassionate: living with a child who has trauma and attachment difficulties can be very stressful.

**Maintain your role**  Don’t be tempted to move too far out of your role. These children need caring and competent teachers.