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# Coronavirus and Trauma — Implications for Children and Young People

## **Why understanding the past is crucial during a crisis**

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Children and young people who have previous experiences of trauma may respond to the coronavirus and the accompanying lockdown in distinct ways. It is important to understand how a child or young person may have adapted to past experiences and how these adaptations can be repaired through new, positive experiences — even during a crisis. But this is difficult and takes time.

During times of stress these underlying vulnerabilities are more likely to emerge.

## The ecological model

**To help us understand why the past is important in thinking about a crisis happening now, we will use a simple ecological model. This reminds us to think about the child being part of a number of different systems – the family, the community and wider society. Within this model it is clear that risk and resilience are not located in the child, but factors that emerge through the interaction between these different systems. Past trauma will shape how a child develops models of the world, themselves and others – and also influence the family, community, and society around the child.**

**The family:** Social distancing has created significant disruption for all families. There is greater pressure on a small number of relationships – the need to compromise more and negotiate more – all in a smaller space. There are also real stressors for carers – worries about jobs, health and loved ones - impacting our mental health and levels of stress. These pressures can impact our ability to help a child regulate their stress. When we are stressed it is harder to step back and reflect, to be empathic and to stay calm if provoked. It is very important to attend to our own needs and well being if we are to help others.



**The community:** At the level of the community we know that the pandemic has had a major impact on a child's wider relationships. They will be losing out on the positive experiences of being with teachers and peers. Lockdown and social distancing have disrupted much of the support available to both children and foster carers. These experiences can trigger a child's memories of past losses and sudden endings experienced earlier in life. It may be hard to place these current losses in perspective and understand that they are not permanent, and, importantly, not their fault. In addition, there is an impact on the richness of a child's social fabric, their opportunities to learn and be stimulated, and to be contained by an everyday school routine. For some children, being more isolated

may bring a sense of safety as they can now avoid the challenges of having to negotiate the outside world.

**The society:** At the level of society, the world during this pandemic has become much more uncertain. None of us know how the coming months will unfold. This naturally creates anxiety for all of us, but particularly for children if their world in the past was also deeply uncertain. They may fear that things will never return to normal, or that the future will mean further losses. They may worry, for example, that their carers will become ill, or lose their jobs and no longer be able to look after them.

## How might changes resulting from the coronavirus pandemic affect children who have experienced trauma in the past?

### **Adaptation to past experiences and the impact on response**

**Children's adaptation to past experiences may impact on their response to the coronavirus pandemic. We can look at three different domains or systems as examples to help us think about this.**

**Threat:** An increased sense of the world being threatening can increase a child's hypervigilance to threat. Hypervigilance is increased attention and wariness of bad things happening. This may manifest in different kinds of feelings, particularly anxiety, as well as behaviours that we can find challenging, such as irritability, aggression and withdrawal. These responses can put greater pressure on family relationships at a time when we all need to co-operate more than ever.



**Memory:** Triggering of past memories, including traumatic memories and experiences of loss, are likely to be more frequent. These memories, and models of past relationships, may come to the fore. This may manifest as increased worry, anxiety about losing current relationships, as well as a tendency for the child or young person to blame themselves. These memories can also lead to concentration problems, and difficulty in thinking about the future.

**Reward:** All children will have lost sources of reward: from peers, teachers and outdoor activities. This loss of reward may be harder to deal with for children who have experienced trauma, as we know they are likely to show differences in their reward system. This may manifest as a lack of motivation, increased tiredness, low mood and concentration problems. These responses require us to think carefully about how to structure and plan the day to engage and motivate a child's activity.



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