



# IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

**Jannawi Family Centre**

Biljana Milosevic (BSW Hons; MAASW)

Centre Director

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## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

- “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless... Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning”

Judith L Herman, 1997, p 33

- Domestic violence includes all forms of abuse and neglect which impacts on children’s development



Judith Lewis herman wrote “Trauma and Recovery- from domestic abuse to political terror” 1992- makes the connection between the effects of war, and that of interpersonal violence as being on the same continuum. Works on restoring connections between the public and private, individual & community, and between men and women.

On page 3 of her book she states that the book is about commonalities: between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes.

The children we work with every day have lived in this world. The way they understand their world, see it, experience it and live it, is affected by this.

Mary Jo McVeigh, a child protection consultant and practitioner here in Sydney says that for children, trauma can effect the wholeness of their being: physical, sensory, sexual, cognitive, social, spiritual, emotional.

## **TERROR**

Responding to danger with both body and mind

Overwhelming sense of fear, threats to life, helplessness, fight, flight or freeze

Symptoms include:

- **Hyperarousal**- permanent alert system, danger to return, startle response, no sleep, vigilance of threat
- **Intrusion**-relive the event over and over, completely interrupts- flashbacks, triggers vivid sensations and images- children's play is monotonous, constantly repeated
- **Constriction**-complete powerlessness leads to numbing- state of total shutdown- a state of detached calm- terror pain totally disappear, body feels separate to self, slow motion life, protection against unbearable pain

Domestic violence involves sexual violence. This means children are, and will be, exposed to sexual and indecent assault, possible pornography, linking violence, sex and fear.

Possible indicators are children with problematic sexual behaviour (PSB)

Traumatic events such as taken by surprise trapped, exposed to exhaustion, physical violation and injury, exposure to extreme violence, witnessing a grotesque death.

No resistance or escape is possible- self defence system shuts down--body gets confused, disorganised

Leads to fragmentation of mind and body

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Applies to thought, memory, consciousness, actions and initiative- no motivation to do anything, lack of sense of future- as planning for it involves risk- to be avoided. It's a defence with consequences.

Herman describes the dialectic of trauma- 2 opposing states of intrusion and constriction flipping between the two overwhelming feelings and numbing. Phases include hyperarousal, then intrusion for days to weeks, then 3-6 month reduction. Numbing and constriction then take over, people living the motions of life, feels like a part of them is dead.

## DISCONNECTION

- Connection or attachment to body, self, community and others is cut
- Destroys rules about the world, and sense of safety and trust
- Leads to alienation
- Domestic violence is a betrayal of an extremely important relationship- ie: parents to nurture and protect, home to be safe and stable

Basic trust is the first fundamental psychological milestone- trauma destroys this foundation- loses a sense of self, how we fit in the world, how the world works to keep us safe, destroys relationships, faith in religion and community.

Violence in the home destroys all rules about the world as the closest relationship for children- and place in the world where the trauma occurs- in the home.

## CAPTIVITY

- Prolonged, repeated trauma
- Perpetrator is the most powerful person in the world
- Total control of another is the ultimate goal
- Fear is the primary tool used
- Connection to self and others is severed
- Demoralisation
- Losing the will to live

Repeated trauma where there is no escape or opportunity to escape, control of perpetrator- for example- slave labor camps, religious cults. No physical restraints, but psychological restraints- children by their dependence

Captivity is to obtain total control over another- uses repetitious psychological trauma- goes back to disconnection and disempowerment. It's job is to instill terror, uses physical violence not often- but threatens

Sense of autonomy is destroyed by scrutiny and control of body and functions- control over food, toileting, sleep

Asking for absolute compliance- what about house and school rules??

Demoralisation is asking to do what goes against own values, beliefs and morals- breaking the law etc..

Losing the will to live as part of "absolute passivity"- Timerman,  
Children will fight anything they view as control or excessive control

## DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND MESSAGES

- Children show us their world through play
- Violence saturates their world
- Power and control
- Gendered: what is observed about men and women's behaviour
- Fear and Intimidation
- Roles and responsibilities in life and the home
- Lack of responsibility and blame of other
- Expression of anger and other emotions
- *Walking on eggshells* rather than focusing on learning and play = delayed development
- All areas are interconnected- cannot be separated



## IMPACT ON PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

- Difficulty sleeping- nightmares & feeling tired
- Frequent illness- flu
- Somatic symptoms- sore head
- Stomach pains/toileting issues
- Problematic eating/ food routines
- Failure to thrive- smaller weight, not growing
- Always feeling unsafe and insecure- world is unsafe
- Self harm or wanting to die- at risk of getting hurt- physical harm
- Lack of co-ordination or pain responses
- Delays in development- gross & fine motor- self help skills, clumsiness, creativity



## SOCIAL/ EMOTIONAL/BEHAVIOURAL

- Low self esteem, no confidence
- Choices and decisions are impacted
- Lack of fairness or justice in the world 'unfair'
- Depression- no laughing, smiling, joking or having fun- 'serious'
- Being 'too perfect'- overly compliant
- Eager to please- appeasing
- Do not push boundaries or constantly push them
- Withdrawal or fearful of adults/ children
- Demanding or unmanageable
- Distress and increased anxiety OR lack of, numb
- Aggressive & disruptive behaviours
- Fight/ Flight or Freeze responses
- Pro- social behaviours- learning to care, empathy





## COGNITIVE

- Inability to focus and lack of concentration or attention = inability to learn
- Impacts on memory – both short and long term
- Impacts on scaffolding and ongoing learning
- No interest in activities, no understanding of activities, no adrenalin or excitement
- Move around the room quickly- short attention spans, state they are bored or things are 'boring'
- Impacts on ability to listen
- Impacts on schooling- class room behaviour and social skills with other children
- Feelings of being 'dumb', shame, embarrassment
- Development of humour, having fun, creativity



## LANGUAGE

- Mirrors the world around them
- 'Colourful' language- swearing, directed to female staff
- Concepts beyond their age
- Delays in receptive and expressive language
- Delays in vocabulary, articulation, volume, listening skills
- Selectively mute OR pressure of speech
- Also impacted are:
  - Self-help skills, self care
  - Ability to follow rules
  - Ability to self soothe, nurture self



## RECOVERY & RESILIENCE

- Healing relationship
- Establishment of safety
  - Creation of a safe environment
- Remembrance and mourning
- Reconnecting with ordinary life

## PROMOTING RESILIENCE

*Mary Jo McVeigh, Doing the Ordinary, 2005*

Positive value system, relationships, self esteem, self efficacy, turning points, secure base and attachment, positive educational experience





**BILJANA MILOSEVIC**  
**CENTRE DIRECTOR**  
Jannawi Family Centre  
9750 0500