

CLC PRACTICE POINT

No.8

September 8, 2010

Trauma and the Developing Child

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There are about 500,000 children in foster care throughout the country at any given time. In Minnesota alone, 185 children enter the foster care system each week. Most of these children have experienced trauma in their lives. This trauma may have occurred through a number of different ways but the majority of these children have suffered at the hands of their caregiver in the form of neglect or physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Specifically, CLC historical data shows that 40-50% of our clients were emotionally abused or neglected before entering the system and that more than 70% of our clients were physically or sexually abused before entering the system. As a lawyer for a child in child protection, understanding the impact of trauma on your client will help you better understand and more effectively advocate for your client.

What is Trauma?

The definition of trauma is an event outside normal human experience. However, trauma is not the event; trauma is what happens inside the individual. An event can become traumatic if it affects your response to stress and causes dysregulation in your life. What constitutes trauma for one person may not be considered traumatic to another. Going through a traumatic experience impacts the developing child. Essentially the trauma that the child has experienced causes an interruption in the development of the brain.¹ The trauma increases the risk of behavioral, emotional, academic and physical problems that could persist throughout the life of the child. These problems can range from being diagnosed with psychiatric conditions, experiencing developmental delays that can affect school performance, substance abuse and so on.

It is likely that our clients, children in foster care, are at an even greater risk for brain development issues because of the prolonged history of trauma that these children have experienced. The typical foster child's life has been full of painful and unimaginable circumstances. The child has likely been neglected by the person or people that are supposed to care for him in addition to suffering some sort of abuse. Before the child has entered into the foster care system he has learned to deal with pain and suffering. Then an event occurs, maybe not more horrific than any other event that has happened in the past, but one that comes to the attention of child protection. The child is taken out of the home due to this event. Being removed from the home is yet another trauma that the child has experienced because he is being taken from the only life he has ever known. Being uprooted from your life is painful and stressful, even when it is necessary. The child has to deal with the grief of losing his family and most likely his friends, while adjusting to new people, a new house, a new bed, and a new school. The reality is that most children in the foster care system have lived through many different traumatic experiences throughout their short lives including, abuse, neglect, removal from the home, as well as, multiple placements throughout their years in foster care. These experiences will shape the adults they become. Regrettably, the majority of traumatized children will not grow into healthy adults, unless they are given the proper treatment to deal with the trauma. This is why it is important for you, as the child's attorney, to know about the effects that trauma can have on the children you are representing. Being aware of what happens developmentally to the traumatized child can help you advocate more effectively for your

¹ www.childtrauma.org

client by making sure that the root of the issues are being treated rather than just putting on a band-aid to treat immediate behavior or exacerbating the problems, as so many methods of treatment do.

Brain Development

At birth, because our brains are undeveloped we are essentially a blank slate and have a vast amount of potential at our fingertips. Once we begin having life experiences our potential is narrowed, this is due to the fact that the brain develops in response to what it experiences. The brain develops in a use-dependent way, the more certain parts of the brain are stimulated the more it changes, this includes both good and bad stimulation. If a specific part of the brain is not being stimulated as it should be, whatever function that area serves will not develop normally. For example, if a child does not receive enough love and attention from its caregiver as an infant, the child may have a difficult time forming emotional bonds with others. The impact of experience on the individual is the greatest during early childhood. By the age of 3, the brain is 90% of what the adult size brain will be and the emotional, behavioral, cognitive and social framework for the rest of an individual's life has been formed.² This means that if a child is not given the necessary tools to develop the brain by the age of three, there is a high likelihood that the brain will be underdeveloped.

What Happens When Brain Development and Trauma Collide

An interruption in brain development can negatively affect how the brain functions. When a child experiences a traumatic event the brain goes into a state of fear-related activation. Entering into the state of fear leads the brain to adopt changes in emotional, behavioral and cognitive functioning to promote survival. If the child enters into this state repeatedly, the chronic activation of the fear response can result in a persistent state of fear. This state of fear can cause the child to respond by fighting, fleeing or freezing. The fight or flight reaction is characterized by increased blood pressure, heart rate and respiration. This reaction causes hypervigilance, and prepares the child to fight with or flee from the potential threat. The freezing reaction occurs when the child uses dissociative methods to psychologically flee from the situation. The child may not have the option to physically flee, so the child instead withdraws from the outside world in order to disconnect from the experience. A hypervigilant response is more common in older children, males and when the trauma involves witnessing or participating in the event. A dissociative response is more common in younger children, females and during traumatic events that the child may be unable to escape from. The more prolonged and pronounced the trauma is, the more likely the changes in the child's brain functions will be long-term and maybe even permanent.

Children who experience a traumatic event and are in the persistent state of fear may exhibit behavioral challenges such as, impulsivity, hypervigilance, hyperactivity, withdrawal from reality, depression, sleep difficulties and anxiety. These behavioral challenges can often be misdiagnosed as various conduct disorders, ADHD, anxiety disorders and a variety of other diagnoses. A misdiagnosis leads to improper treatment and because of this the child never gets treated for the real problem, which is the trauma.

What This Means for the Child Attorney

- Recommend that the court order that your client be assessed for trauma. Many times children that have experienced trauma display what could be thought of as psychotic symptoms, when they are actually symptoms of trauma. If the child is not tested for trauma he may be given medication to quell the psychotic symptoms that are being displayed when he does not need it. Children who have experienced trauma and have undeveloped brains are often misdiagnosed and in the process they are incorrectly treated. If the child is tested for trauma it is much more likely that the root of the problem will be discovered and that is when true treatment can begin.

² Biological Relativity: Time and the Developing Child, Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

- Be aware that the child's actions may be out of their control because of their brain chemistry, NOT because the child is choosing to be oppositional or violent. Sometimes something as simple as a smell or sound can bring a child back to the memories of the trauma.

Tip: If your client is acting out, check into whether there may be any cues that the child is picking up on that are essentially re-exposing the child to the trauma all over again. Look closely because it may be something you have never thought of. Picking up on the cue and attempting to eliminate it from the child's life may help cause a change in the child's behavior.

- Don't be afraid to suggest to the court that alternative treatment may be helpful for your client. Activities such as yoga, martial arts and animal therapy have been known to benefit trauma victims. You could also ask the court to refer your client to a trauma informed massage therapist or acupuncturist.
- When you interact with the child make sure that you are calm and confident. People tend to mirror the actions of those around them. We reflect our internal state to others and that affects them. For example, if you are anxious, the client may become fearful or anxious, which could ultimately cause an escalation in behavior. On the other hand, if you exude calm, the client will become more at ease.

Tip: Be aware of your tone of voice and nonverbal cues, such as body language. When in a hypervigilant state, the child may focus on things such as nonverbal cues because they may be seen as threat related. If the child feels threatened, he is much more likely to enter into the fight or flight state of the fear response.

The clients that you represent as a volunteer attorney through Children's Law Center have almost certainly experienced trauma in their lives. As an advocate for the child, it is your responsibility to attempt to understand the hurdles that your client has faced in the past, is currently facing, and will be facing in the future. Discovering the effects that traumatic experiences have on the developing child will make you look at your clients with a different perspective. The child who has become increasingly defiant may not actually be defiant but rather in a constant state of hypervigilance due to the trauma he has experienced. The child who has completely tuned everyone out and is being described as being distant and unresponsive may have retreated inside her mind because she cannot deal with the reality of what she has been through. Being aware of the fact that your client has experienced trauma and that the trauma has shaped who the child is, will help you become a more effective advocate because you will have the knowledge to seek out the necessary treatments to remedy the true problems and not just the immediate ones. If you would like more information on trauma and its effects on children contact CLC.