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# LIVING IT

**CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE**

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# GROWING UP IS HARD TO DO

Exploring the connection between childhood trauma and youth offending

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**THROUGH ADULT EYES** childhood might seem like a carefree time, unburdened by the trials and tribulations of modern life. Yet with common childhood experiences including exam pressure, worries about body image, family breakdown, bullying, relationships and simply the pressure of forging independence, even at the best of times growing up is hard.

## But what if childhood was not the best of times?

At least 16,500 children in Scotland are estimated to be affected by the imprisonment of a parent or close relative each year, more than are affected by divorce. In the UK, around 20,000 children are affected by the death of a parent each year (Winston's Wish, 2014), with certain disadvantaged groups such as young offenders disproportionately affected. My own research with 33 young men in HM YOI Polmont found that 91% of these young men had been bereaved, and many had suffered traumatic and multiple losses (Vaswani, 2014). Furthermore, more than 50,000 children in Scotland are estimated to live with domestic abuse and one in seven children across the UK are estimated to suffer from parental neglect. Even the system responses that exist to alleviate these adverse circumstances, such as being taken in to care, can be a traumatic experience for young people. How do young people facing adversity navigate through these already difficult years?

## The impact of trauma

Typical responses to trauma include *physical* symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, palpitations, loss of appetite or sleep problems, and *emotional* reactions such as anxiety, grief, self-blame, anger, rumination or numbness (see Snapshot 1). These symptoms stem from the evolutionary 'freeze-fight-flight' response to stress and in a non-problematic scenario these symptoms are short-term and tend to subside over a few months. Experiencing such stressors in childhood need not, therefore, have a long-lasting impact: children are remarkably resilient and with the right support can go on to lead positive and fulfilling lives. "I believe that everything happens for a reason...it only made me stronger..." (young adult preparing to leave foster care, Samuels and Pryce, 2008).

### Snapshot 1: Bereaved young men talk about their responses to loss and trauma (Vaswani, 2014).

"I did have thoughts when she died, 'I shouldnae have done this' and 'I should have done that'."

"I felt angry at the guy that killed him... for a long time, I know who it was...not long after I came across him and all I thought was revenge."

"I've certainly not cared about people as much, because after losing friends, and losing friends before, I was probably wondering 'why is this happening to me?'"

However, for young people who experience repeated traumas throughout childhood, or for those who do not receive the support they need, these experiences can have a significant and detrimental effect on their future physical and emotional health. There are many reasons why a young person may not get the help they need, such as a lack of appropriate support networks or difficulties in identifying and articulating their emotional responses. Young males often face additional barriers to help-seeking due to gender-role socialisation and a tendency towards a macho culture. The stigma of certain losses and experiences (for example, parental imprisonment) may mean that a young person might not disclose their circumstances to others who could help.

Other losses are more ambiguous, for example temporary separation from family, or the death of an abusive parent, which can cause confusion, complicate

responses and can be likened to 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka, 1999). Lastly, abuse and neglect can leave young people with disorganised and problematic attachment relationships: they may push away the very people that are trying to help. "When I was younger my mum used to hit me...It did affect me...I'd take my anger out on people that I liked most" (young man convicted of a serious offence, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2011).

### Snapshot 2: Stoicism and gender roles

"I didn't want any [support] I just wanted to be a big man...I was going to the dark side and I was lovin' it" (young man attending a Youth Offending Team, Paton et al., 2009).

"Some people really try and put on a brave face, I haven't seen anyone cry ... because you don't want to show anything like that for reputation ..." (Vaswani, 2014)

"I'll just keep plodding on. It's all you can do. Sooner you realise that the better cos eventually everyone is going to die anyway" (Vaswani, 2014).

Without intervention these emotions and stress responses can manifest as challenging behaviours, especially as trauma can also leave children vulnerable to over-reaction to even innocuous incidents. Anger, irritability, aggression and poor concentration are all natural responses to loss and grief, but may be misinterpreted, and therefore responded to, by adults as poor behaviour rather than an expression of underlying trauma. Traumatic events in childhood can therefore be linked to a range of risk-taking behaviours in adolescence and adulthood, with the risks increasing with greater exposure to adverse life events. Behavioural responses such as substance misuse, risky sexual-behaviour, suicide, and reduced awareness of danger are common. These behaviours can generate exposure to further trauma, thus marking the start of a cycle of victimisation and adverse life experiences.

### Snapshot 3: Coping strategies

"One minute I can be okay then a minute later, I can start to kick off, I can just change in seconds" (young man convicted of a serious offence, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2011).

"The more I drank the more I wouldnae think of him basically... Not to forget about him but forget about that [death]" (Vaswani, 2014)

"I was getting picked on by my step-dad. You have abuse happen to you and it doesn't feel like it was dealt with and you want to rebel to get away from the feeling" (young woman, User Voice, 2011).

Given this behavioural response to childhood trauma, it is not surprising that traumatic events feature regularly in the backgrounds of young people involved in offending. Substance misuse is strategy frequently employed to mask and forget about pain, but can lead to an increased risk of becoming entangled with the law. Risk-taking can lead to young people making the wrong decisions. Frustration and anger can often lead to violent outbursts with potentially disastrous consequences, as young people who had experienced extreme hurt wanted others to experience their pain too. Thus young people involved in the youth or criminal justice systems, especially those in custody, tend to report higher levels of trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and multiple losses than young people in the general population. It is therefore unsurprising that mental health needs such as anxiety, depression and somatic complaints are also a common feature in this vulnerable population.

### Snapshot 4: The connection between loss, trauma and offending?

"Like I don't think I would be here if my Gran didnae die because my behaviour kinda changed, I'd no been in prison before ..." (Vaswani, 2014).

"If you're in a negative habitat ... if people feel sad about themselves then misery needs company, I want someone else to feel how I feel, you see what I am saying" (young man, User Voice, 2011)

Experiences of loss and trauma in childhood can have profound and long-term implications for young people. Even small traumas can have an accumulative effect, but may be missed or underestimated by the adults trying to help. Furthermore, system responses such as being taken in to care or imprisonment further compound these losses and can be experienced as traumatic events in themselves. It is therefore important that professionals, and also society as a whole, can recognise the impact of trauma in young people, and understand that young people with a background of traumatic and adverse experiences may respond to events in what appear to be unexpected ways.

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# UK Justice Policy Review:

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6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

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