

# Trauma & impacts on behaviour

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Carers

## Why this resource?

Many children have lived through experiences that felt overwhelming or confusing, and this can shape how safe they feel, how they relate to adults, and how they show their needs through behaviour. This resource helps carers understand behaviour through a lens of safety and connection rather than blame. It explains why children may react strongly, withdraw, or struggle with trust, and reminds carers that these responses are not deliberate or personal but connected to a child's trauma.



## Understanding Trauma & Attachment

Trauma is not only about what happened to a child, but how their body and emotions experienced it — especially when stress, loss, or fear occurred without enough adult support. When children have had to adapt to overwhelming experiences, their nervous systems may stay on high alert, even when life becomes safer.

Attachment develops through everyday experiences of being comforted, protected, and understood. When care has been inconsistent, unavailable, or overwhelming, children often develop protective ways of relating to adults. These patterns are not conscious choices or personality traits — they are survival responses shaped by early experiences.

Children may show different attachment patterns, including:

- **Secure attachment** – the child seeks comfort, trusts adults, and can return to play
- **Avoidant attachment** – the child appears independent and avoids closeness or support
- **Anxious attachment** – the child is clingy, worried about separation, or hard to soothe
- **Disorganised attachment** – the child shows mixed or confusing responses, often moving between closeness and fear

These patterns are not fixed labels. With safe, predictable, and emotionally available care, children's attachment responses can soften and change over time.



## How trauma shows up differently in children

Trauma does not look the same in every child. The same experience can lead to very different behaviours depending on age, temperament, and support.

You may notice:

- Strong reactions to small changes or separations
- Heightened need for control or predictability
- Difficulty trusting adults or accepting comfort
- Regression in sleep, toileting, or emotional skills

Children may test relationships, push carers away, or cling tightly — all of which can be attempts to work out: "Are you safe? Will you stay?"



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## Window of Tolerance

Children cope best when their bodies feel calm enough to think, play, and connect. In these moments, they can listen, manage feelings, and recover more easily from stress. Some children move out of this balanced state very quickly. Their bodies may react as if something is wrong, even when they are safe. This can look like overwhelm (big emotions, meltdowns, aggression, refusal) or shutdown (withdrawal, silence, fatigue, appearing "checked out").

This coping range is often called a child's window of tolerance. **Trauma can narrow this window, meaning small stresses can lead to big reactions.** When children are overwhelmed or shut down, they need calm support and reduced demands to feel safe again.

## Neurodiversity & Trauma

Children with neurodivergence may experience the world as more intense or overwhelming. **Sensory input, changes, and social demands can place extra strain on their nervous systems, particularly when they have also experienced stress or disruption.**

Trauma can increase sensory sensitivity, emotional overload, and difficulty with transitions or communication. What looks like behaviour is often a child trying to cope when their system is overloaded.

Trauma-informed care focuses on reducing demands during stress, supporting regulation before expectations, and adjusting environments to meet the child's needs. Predictability, clear communication, and acceptance of difference help children feel safer and more able to engage.

## Circle of Security

Children move between two needs: exploring the world and returning for comfort. They need adults who support both — encouraging independence while also offering reassurance and help with big feelings.

When children have experienced stress or inconsistency, this movement can be difficult. They may cling, push away, or react strongly, not because they don't want connection, but because they are unsure it will be there.

Carers help by **staying predictable, emotionally present, and supportive, showing children that it is safe to explore and safe to come back.**

## What about our own history?

Caring for children with big feelings can stir things in us too. Certain behaviours may touch old memories, patterns, or feelings we didn't expect, especially when a child is distressed, rejecting, or hard to soothe.

This doesn't mean we're doing anything wrong. It means our nervous system is responding. When we can **pause, notice what's being activated, and offer ourselves some compassion, we're better able to stay present with the child.**

Support, reflection, and gentle self-care help carers remain steady. Looking after ourselves is not separate from caring for children — it's part of how we offer safety, calm, and connection.

## Further Reading & Resources

- The Wisdom of Trauma – Documentary (Gabor Maté)
- The Seen Documentary – ParentTV
- Window of Tolerance – Beacon House (UK)
- Circle of Security Parenting (COS-P) – Carer Resources