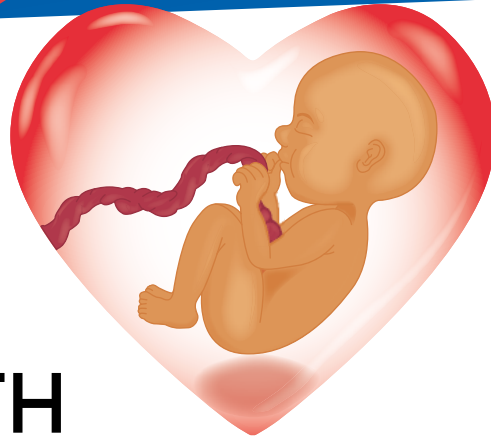


THE IN UTERO EXPERIENCE

TRAUMA BEFORE BIRTH



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The impact trauma can have on a child doesn't only start after they are born... it can start before, when they are still inside their mother's body. So what can case managers do if they recognise early issues? And what can carers do to help a child who may have experienced trauma before birth.

Causes and impacts

In utero is the term used to describe an unborn child still inside their mother's body – that is, inside her womb or uterus. As the mother's body is providing the care to the child, any stress the mother experiences (maternal stress) can transfer to the child. If the type of stress is particularly bad, this can cause the child trauma.

Trauma in utero is commonly caused by chaotic or unpredictable lifestyle factors including, but not limited to, the mother's exposure to domestic violence, lack of antenatal care, or substance misuse during pregnancy. Stress experienced by the mother can lead to elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol in her body, which can then be passed onto her unborn child via the placenta. Prenatal exposure to maternal stress and toxic substance misuse can have significant and sometimes lifelong implications for the child, such as:

- > foetal distress
- > low birth weight and head circumference
- > neurobehavioural abnormalities
- > impairment of normal brain development and functioning (learning capacity, emotional regulation and stability, attachment issues, physical coordination, self-esteem)
- > symptoms of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)
- > anxiety and depression
- > impaired capacity to form healthy attachments with others.

Elevated levels of cortisol and foetal distress can impact the architecture of the child's developing brain, possibly changing its size, shape, structure and organisation. This can result in reduced and impaired functioning. Considering the brain develops in a bottom-up fashion, if the lower areas of the brain that develop first become over-sensitive to stress, they can cause developmental problems in higher areas of the brain that are responsible for higher order thinking, such as impulse inhibition, problem solving and rational decision-making. These problems then limit the child's capacity after birth to respond to stimuli and situations in a calm and rational manner – even seemingly minor incidents can trigger the child beyond their coping capacity.

Research also shows children exposed to trauma during pregnancy because of their mother's substance misuse are at high risk of abuse and neglect after they are born. This increased risk may be due to the combination of:

- > the child's complex health and care needs, including the impacts on their developing brain
- > poor attachment ability after lengthy periods of hospitalisation due to substance withdrawal
- > the detrimental impact of substance misuse on the mother's parenting capacity where substance abuse continues after the child is born.

What can professionals do to help?

- ♥ Encourage and support expectant mothers to seek assistance for their substance misuse. There is significant stigma around seeking assistance, in particular when pregnant, and this could stop mothers from reaching out.
- ♥ Provide support targeted to domestic violence and assess the mother's circumstances, including safety and risks to her and the unborn child. This knowledge can be utilised in safety planning.

What can carers do to help?

- ♥ Involve the child in play and encourage interaction, turn taking, sharing, joy and laughter through sharing books and stories.
- ♥ Make routines enjoyable experiences through play.
- ♥ Engage in rhythmic activities such as patting, rocking, massaging, swinging, bouncing on a trampoline, drumming.
- ♥ Observe the child's verbal and non-verbal cues. Where the child is demonstrating fight/flight/freeze responses, make note and reflect on any triggers or stimuli that may have set them off.
- ♥ Role model emotional regulation and talk out loud about your own strong emotions and how you will manage or resolve conflicts or problems.
- ♥ Provide physical and emotional safety within the child's home environment. Over time this will help the child experience the world as a safe place and shift their internal working model of themselves as lovable and worthwhile.
- ♥ Focus on developing a trusting relationship with the child, where attachment issues are addressed through relational healing.
- ♥ Use a calm and even tone, and demonstrate compassion and curiosity about the child's behaviour, needs, interests and experiences.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

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