

Chapter 8

TRICKY CURRICULUM

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When we visit the cinema or buy a DVD or video game, there is usually a classification that indicates what age-range it is suitable for based on its content. Occasionally, a TV continuity announcer will warn us that an upcoming broadcast may contain scenes of an upsetting nature. Even music tracks are sometimes accompanied by a warning about explicit content. These warnings are designed to assist us in making choices about what is suitable material for ourselves and our children.

There are times when it would be helpful if aspects of the school curriculum came with a similar warning. Basic staples of the curriculum at all ages can pose genuine difficulties for children who have experienced trauma, and especially for those who are care-experienced, adopted or previously looked-after. While it is not always possible, or even desirable, to remove these topics altogether, awareness of their impacts and extra thought given to their planning and delivery may help to prevent children from responding negatively to material that unexpectedly triggers strong feelings.

Curriculum hotspots

Bring in a photograph of yourself as a baby. Draw a family tree. Create a timeline of key events in your life so far. If we look at any of these common tasks with a care-experienced child or young person in our mind, we can immediately see the difficulties. Children who no longer live with their birth families may not have access to family photographs. A family tree is not a simple diagram for an adopted child. While their classmates are writing, 'Age 7: I got my first pet' on their life chronologies, would a child feel comfortable writing, 'Age 3: My dad went to prison', or 'Age 4: I was taken into care'?

Tricky curriculum areas fall broadly into two categories: topics or activities that directly impact on or exclude children who have experienced trauma, are looked-after or are previously looked-after, and topics or activities that may serve as triggers to individual children depending on their circumstances.

The examples above fall into the first category. We could also include writing autobiographical stories, mapping eye colour or other characteristics in your family as part of studying genetics, researching family history, and any other topic or activity which assumes that immediate families are only biological relatives, and children remain in the same family throughout childhood.

The difficulty created by these types of activities is not only practical. In most cases, there is likely to be an alternative option for the individual, such as bringing in a random baby photo found on the internet. However, both the activity itself, and the practical workarounds proposed, create conflict for children whose backgrounds are not straightforward.

Let's take the example of the baby photo. Straightaway, the request for a baby photo that an adopted child may not have access to highlights their adoptive status, their difference. The child or their parents then have to make a decision about how to handle the request. Explaining the predicament to the teacher involves revealing personal information. While most adopted children should be aware of their own status, they may still not wish their teachers and peers to know about it. Teachers would most likely be understanding of the situation and willing to accept alternatives, but the alternatives themselves only serve to further highlight the child's different status. If the child brings in a stock baby photo, will a pretence be kept up that this is really the child's baby picture? Or will everybody need to know the truth, and the reasons for that decision?

For some children, the impulse will be to hide sensitive information about themselves and their families. If their home life is chaotic or they have

experienced traumatic events within the family recently or in the past, they may feel a sense of responsibility for not revealing the reality of their home lives and situations. A child may omit to mention on their personal timeline that a parent was incarcerated for instance, while internally being thrown into a state of turmoil over the remainder of that event.

Other children may be prompted by such activities to share very personal information. This may be in the form of a disclosure, or simply a case of a child naively over-sharing details about themselves and their lives which they may later come to regret, for instance, revealing their adoptive or looked-after status to the whole class while giving a talk on 'My Life'. Once spoken, the words can never be taken back.

While some topics or activities are likely to cause difficulties for any child who has experienced trauma, or is care-experienced, others may serve as triggers only for individual children depending on their particular circumstances. These may be linked to specific occurrences or incidents in a child's life, or may be more generalised, relating to themes of loss, rejection, abandonment or fear, for instance.

In Year 4 they worked on World War II evacuees who eventually returned to their parents. This created three months of additional anxiety. It never crossed the school's mind, the mental anguish it caused.

As part of foster care training, potential carers are introduced to the concept of being a behaviour detective. It is not possible to know everything about a child that comes into a foster carer's home, so all triggers cannot be avoided, but depending on what a child has experienced, even certain sounds and smells can be triggers. Foster carers need to become adept at recognising anxiety and fear-fuelled behaviours arising from such triggers, and responding to the cause rather than the presenting behaviour. Carers are trained to re-arrange their households to minimise potential triggers, including, for instance, avoiding spending time in a fostered child's bedroom, or leaving the door open if they do. Similarly, teachers cannot know the intimate life history of every child in their classroom, but can be aware that some unexpected and unwanted reactions can occur as a result of triggers related to a child's traumatic experiences.

As children move through their school years, more and more challenging topics are introduced. Themes such as sex and relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, and crime and punishment may have direct links to

experiences that some children have faced. Children who have experienced trauma may have a stronger reaction than others to topics referencing sensitive content, such as issues relating to war, terrorism, bereavement, or the plight of refugees, even if it is not directly connected to their experience. The themes covered in special assemblies by organisations like the NSPCC or Barnardo's might be too close to home for some. A child who has been taken into care may see aspects of their own experience reflected in children who were evacuated during World War II. Asking those children to, for instance, write a diary entry from the point of view of an evacuated child risks awakening all the trauma and grief of their own experience.

These individual triggers are particularly difficult for a class teacher to navigate. The range of potential triggers, and the range of possible responses to these, makes it very difficult for all eventual possibilities to be predicted. Some children will not make the link between the subject matter and their own experience, and sail through the topic oblivious. Others may seem fine in the classroom, but react once they are home. However, if a child is experiencing an unexplained increase in anxiety-fuelled behaviour, then triggers in the current curriculum are always worth considering as a possible cause.

Approaches to try

- Look at your curriculum with a 'trauma lens' and make a note of activities and topics which may be upsetting or triggering. Consider current trauma as well as historical experiences. The simple request, 'Tell me what you did during the holidays' can be terribly humiliating for a child who lives in a chaotic home, or who may have spent the whole time caring for a parent or younger siblings and has no lovely stories of holidays or day trips to tell.
- Speak to parents and carers of looked-after, adopted and previously looked-after children about their child's particular needs. Some children will have triggers which are well known to their families.
- Avoid making changes to topics and activities that only apply to children who are adopted, looked-after, or particularly vulnerable for another reason, as being singled out adds to their feeling of difference and highlights it.

- Consider the learning objective of activities which may be problematic, and find ways to deliver the same objective in a different way for the whole class. For example: explore themes of growing up, change and chronology using photographs of yourself over time, rather than asking children to bring in photographs; create a family tree or timeline of a famous or historical figure; use non-human or hypothetical examples to investigate genetics.
- Ensure that all parents and carers are aware of the topics their child's class will be covering each term. It is not possible to avoid all difficult topics, and neither is it possible to shield children forever, but involved parents and carers can prepare their children for topics that might evoke big feelings, and work with the school to find strategies to support the child. This is better for everybody than managing a crisis after it has erupted.
- Make sure parents and carers are aware of visitors to the school, and special events which may highlight sensitive subject matter.
- At times when sensitive subject matter is unavoidable, ensure that there is a safe place for affected children to go, preferably with key adults available.
- Be aware that children who have experienced trauma may react more strongly than others to upsetting news stories, and that discussions of those stories in class and around the school may provoke anxiety-fuelled behaviours.
- Resist the urge to compare children. Every human being processes adverse experiences in their own way. Just because the last adopted child you taught was fine with this topic, it does not mean the next one will be.

Reading material and films

Stories and films where children are the protagonists seem to rely heavily on plot devices that remove the children's parents in the first few scenes, or even before the story has begun. The world of children's literature and film is replete with orphans. Think of Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables, Lyra from *His Dark Materials*, Peter Pan, Sophie from *The BFG*, and even the three children in *Despicable Me*.

Sometimes, the child's orphanhood is an essential part of their story but, in many cases, perfectly acceptable parents are unceremoniously dispatched purely so that the child heroes can go about their exploits unhindered by inconveniences such as regular bedtimes or healthy meals. Bereavement or abandonment is little more than a plot device, and cruel step-parents and guardians regularly mete out arbitrary punishments in order to set up a scenario whereby children will be rescued by a fantasy benefactor, or will somehow save themselves.

The orphaned child with a wicked guardian is such a common trope in children's literature that we often don't pause to think about it. It is even possible that children whose own experiences directly resonate with the characters in the books they are reading don't notice the connection because they have become so used to it. Recognising the ubiquitous nature of the theme of the abandoned and orphaned child is, however, a wake-up call to adults that books, films, art and music are just as likely to contain triggering themes and content as the most sensitive parts of our school curriculum.

Think about the stories that you plan to read to your class, or that you will expect them to read, the films you might show them as an end of term treat, or the books in the class reading corner or school library. Many will directly reference children who have lost their parents, who have been caught up in war or tragedy, who have been bullied, or attacked or abused in some way. While some children may be able to separate these fictional experiences from their own without even thinking about it, others, and especially children whose developmental and emotional age is younger than their chronological age, might find such material more difficult to cope with. A mild on-screen thrill can evoke genuine terror in some, and something that is 'Just a story!' to most children might be a horribly accurate portrayal of remembered experiences to others. Older children who are 'young for their age' may struggle to separate fiction from reality, and become anxious about things they have read in stories, even to the point of experiencing nightmares. Others may adopt the fantasies presented to them in fiction as being more palatable than the reality, holding on to them fiercely just as little orphan Annie held on to her broken locket.

We can't shield children from difficult topics in the curriculum for ever and neither can we weed out every story, book, song or film that might upset them. Trauma-informed practice is not concerned with trapping children in their difficulties through removing all expectations, but in recognising the challenges they face, and supporting them to make progress from where they are, not where we wish they were. It is hoped that every

person who has experienced trauma will one day be able to come out from under its shadow, but that will not happen by magic. If a child feels safe at school, and has good attachment relationships with key adults, then, supported by their parents or carers, they may benefit from the exploration of challenging themes through fiction, film, song and drama. This is not the same as expecting them to 'get on with it' or 'toughen up', or manage their strong feelings unsupported.

It undoubtedly takes up valuable time checking books, films and other resources for potentially triggering content, but this time is likely to be amply re-paid in the form of a quieter, calmer classroom if doing so helps to avoid raising the anxiety levels of particularly vulnerable children.

Approaches to try

- Review the books, stories, films and other material you plan to share with your class with a trauma-lens, making yourself aware of any challenging themes.
- Ensure that all parents and carers have a complete list of such materials in advance so that they can familiarise themselves with the content and support and prepare their child.
- Plan to have support in place when difficult themes will be covered, including access to key adults and availability of a safe space.
- If children have free choice of class or library books, discuss with parents and carers how best to support children to choose books that will be suitable, without singling them out. Where possible, involve children in this process with the aim of enabling them to make informed choices.
- Where resources do contain challenging material, acknowledge this, and offer support. Avoid issuing a blanket 'trigger warning' as this puts the responsibility on the child to take action to protect themselves, whereas children need adults to support them to manage big feelings.
- Be aware that a child may be unsettled by material without knowing why. If there is a rise in anxiety-fuelled behaviours (including avoidance and dissociation), consider the possibility that issues raised by stories, books and films may lie beneath it.

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Listening to a story, reading quietly, or watching a documentary or film in class can be difficult for some children, even if there is no challenging content involved, as it requires children to sit still, to sit quietly and to pay attention, sometimes for long periods. Children who have experienced early trauma may find this particularly difficult, even if they are older, for a number of reasons:

- Poor core strength may mean that a child finds it physically tiring to sit still on a chair, or on the floor unsupported for long periods.
- A child who is hypo-sensitive to vestibular and proprioceptive input (see Chapter 2) may wriggle and fidget to get the sensory input they need while sitting still.
- Hyper-vigilant children may find themselves distracted by unexplained noises around them in a quiet classroom, or by movements they see out of the corner of their eye.
- Unexpected loud noises in films and videos may startle those with auditory sensory processing difficulties.
- Films and videos can contain a lot of visual stimulation that may impact on children with visual sensory processing difficulties, especially if the room has been darkened.
- Many children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) have attention difficulties, finding it difficult to settle down and to filter out distractions and concentrate consistently.
- Children with poor receptive language skills may struggle to follow a story being read aloud, lose interest, and begin to fidget and disrupt out of boredom.
- Similarly, children whose reading skills lag behind their peers will have to work much harder at silent reading, tiring more quickly.
- Reading aloud in class is particularly challenging for children who lack confidence, who fear being ridiculed or who value the safety that they find in being effectively invisible. In those circumstances, a child may even prefer to be excluded from the lesson than participate in an activity that causes them deep anxiety.

Approaches to try

- Provide a sensory break before and after to give children the vestibular and proprioceptive input they need. Activities such as carrying stacks of books, or pushing furniture out of the way, can be incorporated into the preparation for the quiet period.
- Ensure children are sitting comfortably and are well-supported, with back support if on the floor.
- Use wobble cushions and wedge cushions for 'active sitting' for restless, fidgety children, to improve seated posture and increase proprioceptive input.
- Allow hyper-vigilant, easily distracted children to sit against the wall at the side or the back of the room so they have a clear view of the classroom, making them less likely to turn around in their seats in response to movements and noises.
- Allow the use of ear defenders for children who react strongly to auditory input.
- Read aloud in short chunks, pausing regularly to re-focus children and ensure they are following.
- Try paired reading aloud with a partner instead of reading aloud to the class or reading in silence.
- Actively teach, reinforce and model good listening skills regularly.

Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day

While Mothers' and Fathers' Days are not the only celebratory days that weave themselves into the school curriculum, they can be particularly challenging celebrations for children who are adopted, looked-after, previously looked-after or experiencing other kinds of family difficulty and, as such, they deserve some special attention.

Perhaps in recognition of the complexity of modern families, Fathers' Day is often less celebrated, and less ubiquitous in the media than Mothers' Day. Schools have become used to encouraging children to create cards and gifts for a variety of male role models, recognising that there will be those in every classroom who do not live with, or even have contact with, their birth fathers. In some schools, Fathers' Day passes without celebration.

Mothers' Day, however, is still widely recognised, and its approach is heralded by an intense period of advertising, idealising the mother–child relationship. Both approaches can cause difficulties for children from non-standard family backgrounds.

Since 2006, there have been nearly 3000 adoptions recorded for same-sex families in the UK. In the year ending March 2017, 10 per cent of adoptions were to single adopters, and just under 10 per cent were to same-sex couples in England alone. At any given time, there are approximately 95,000 children in the care of local authorities across the UK, who may be living with foster carers or relatives, in children's homes or elsewhere. Add to this the tens of thousands of children who are permanently placed with relatives or others on different legal orders, and it is clear that traditional approaches to Mothers' and Fathers' Days could be problematic for huge numbers of children who, for whatever reason, can no longer live with their birth parents.

When my four-year-old adopted son brought home the invitation to the 'Mothers Day Tea Party', I phoned the school to ask if I, as one of two dads, would be able to attend. At first they suggested he bring in a female relative. It took several phone calls before it was agreed that my son would be allowed to bring his parent to this event, like the other children.

While some care-experienced children's difficulties around celebrating Mothers' and Fathers' Days may overlap with children who have experienced family separation, parental bereavement, or who live in single or same-sex parent households, children who have been permanently removed from their birth families can also experience specific additional conflicts around the existence of a day where parents are celebrated.

Let's consider Mothers' Day from the perspective of, for example, an adopted child. This child has two mothers: their adoptive mother and their birth mother. Which mother should they celebrate? Does making a card for their adoptive mother somehow betray their birth mother? If Mothers' Day makes them think about their birth mother, does this betray their adoptive mother? A child who has memories of neglect and abuse in their birth family may struggle to reconcile those memories with the idealised notions of motherhood portrayed on Mothers' Day. An adopted child may also have conflicted feelings towards the adoptive mother who seems to have replaced their birth mother, which Mothers' Day only serves to highlight.

Even if your school makes no mention of Mothers' or Fathers' Day, has no card-making lessons, and puts on no special events, the existence of these days is impossible to ignore. While some care-experienced children will be unaffected, many will find these times of year upsetting even if their attention is not drawn to it in school, leading to an increase in anxiety and trauma-fuelled behaviours. Some may not even be able to pinpoint the source of their own distress.

Approaches to try

- Be aware that Mothers' and Fathers' Days can raise difficult feelings for many children. Increase supervision and support, especially by key adults, and involve parents and carers in plans for any celebration that will take place in school.
- Ensure that plans for celebrating these days account for the full range of diverse families represented in school, and in society as a whole. See it as an opportunity to celebrate family in all its forms.
- If the children are to make cards in class time, allow all children to make several cards for whomever they choose. Avoid singling out children and providing them with individualised alternative activities.
- Remain neutral if children choose to make cards for unexpected people, for example, birth parents they have no memory of. Resist the urge to encourage them to make a card for their carer or adoptive parent instead. Speak to the parents or carers privately about this if appropriate.
- Be careful about the language used in school and about assumptions around what a mother or a father is. Not all mothers give birth to their children, for instance. Most adoptive families avoid the terms 'real mum' or 'real dad' and instead use terms such as 'birth mum' or 'first mum'. Check with families to make sure you know the terms their children are familiar with.