

# Supporting Children in Care:

A Guide for Educators  
in early learning services  
me ngā kōhanga reo,  
schools, kura and  
wharekura.



# Supporting Children In Care: A Guide for Educators

A child's early experiences play an important role in their ability to learn and to build relationships with others.

This guide is intended to help educators to understand and respond to some of the challenges that children and young people in care may present with as a consequence of their possibly traumatic early experiences.

While not every child or young person in care will experience difficulties with learning, many do. Every child or young person in care has experienced significant and often multiple losses – loss of their birth family, possibly loss of one or more foster families, loss of previous friends, schools, homes etc. Many will have difficulty or will be unable to trust adults, as they have been let down in the past by those who should have been able to look after them. The world around a child or young person who feels unable to trust and rely on others can be a very scary and overwhelming place.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki, are currently working on National Care Standards for children and young people in care. It is anticipated that these standards will go live in July 2018, and one aspect of them will focus specifically on education. While work on these is in the very early stages, we anticipate that they will articulate what will be expected of caregivers, social workers and the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki. Educators working with children and young people in care will need to be aware of the National Care Standards as they will have a role to play in supporting caregivers, social workers and the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki, to implement them. Further guidance and/or an update of this document will likely be issued to the sector when the National Care Standards go live.

*A strong attachment to their school can provide a child with stability in an otherwise unstable world: offering relationships, maintaining friendships, providing positive and enjoyable learning opportunities and ultimately building resilience and hope.*

***Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatized Children***



# The importance of secure relationships

A secure relationship with a main caregiver, enables babies and young children's optimal physical, emotional and intellectual development.

This relationship allows them to feel safe, protected and nurtured; from this secure base they can gradually make sense of the world around them. This early attachment is essential for the child's development.

When a caregiver has been unable to provide this bond, the child may experience attachment difficulties. This can contribute to a range of problems around the child's development of emotional, social, communication and cognitive skills. These difficulties may be exhibited in a range of ways, including a fight-flight response when presented with challenges, a desperation to please, strong preference for routine and sameness and withdrawal.

Early experiences of abuse, trauma, neglect and pain may result in these difficulties becoming severe. This could include a lack of empathy or conscience, inability to make or keep friends, limited attention span, memory difficulties, difficulties accepting help or praise, aggression, stealing, defiance, attention seeking and much more.

All these early experiences can have a negative impact on children's development and wellbeing. There used to be a simplistic view that once a baby or child was removed from the difficult early setting and placed in a secure, caring setting, they would 'bounce back' and stop exhibiting the previous challenging behaviours. However, every child in care – whether they are infants, preschoolers, school age or adolescent – may have experienced pain, loss and trauma. Their understanding of the world has been informed by these experiences and it is only through consistent, ongoing empathy and support that they can start to develop a new, healthier understanding of, and relationship with, the world around them. This guide will explain some of the behaviours you might see in an early learning service or classroom, why these might be seen and some strategies that might help.



# Tips for educators of children in care



- **First and foremost the child or young person needs to know they are wanted and valued as part of the community.** Greet them by name every day and try to end each day on a positive. Demonstrate an interest in them on a personal level e.g. if they mentioned they were going to the beach at the weekend, ask them about this on Monday morning. Treat each day as a fresh start.
- **Listen to them and monitor their behaviour.** Observe and record patterns of behaviour to enable you to understand and support them.
- **Use consistent positive behavioural management/positive guidance approaches.**
- **Set realistic, achievable goals in relation to behaviour;** where possible do this in partnership with the child or young person. Work closely with carers and review regularly.
- **Acknowledge successes regularly but keep it low key.** Overheard praise can be very powerful, as can text messages and emails to older students. Celebrate success in ways that are meaningful and unique, but don't overwhelm.
- **Keep in contact with caregivers and social workers letting them know daily or weekly progress.** This will also allow educators to be updated on issues happening at home that may be affecting behaviour at the early learning service or school.
- **Be approachable.** Encourage caregivers to communicate with you and share any issues or concerns.
- **Identify and plan for dates that might be upsetting** e.g. Mother's/Father's Day, parents' birthdays, anniversary of entering the care system.
- **Be aware of the stigma that children and young people in care experience.** Put strategies in place to minimise any stigma they may experience

# Taking a trauma-informed approach to supporting children and young people in care



Every child and young person is unique. The behaviours that you see are a way of communicating a need.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE	WHY YOU MIGHT SEE THIS	SOME STRATEGIES TO TRY
Seeks your attention constantly	I feel safer when I have your attention. I want reassurance but I'm not sure how to communicate my needs. I worry that if I don't have your attention you will forget about me, as others have done before. I might talk all the time or ask trivial questions.	<p><b>For younger children</b> spend time with the child at regular intervals throughout the day. When moving on to another task explain where you're going and when you'll be back e.g. 'I'm just going to check on the children in the sleep room then I'll come back.'</p> <p><b>For older children and young people</b> Have a set routine. Sit the child or young person close to you. Check in regularly and tell them when the next check in will be e.g. 'I'm going to see how the other groups are getting on. I'll be back in 10 minutes to check how you're doing'.</p>
Physically or verbally aggressive behaviours	I respond to frightening or threatening situations by fighting, fleeing or freezing. I am anxious and looking out for threats all day, every day – it doesn't take much for me to lose control.	Avoid threat of removal or rejection as a consequence – this reinforces the child or young person's negative view of themselves. 'Time in' not 'Time out'. If removing from a situation is unavoidable redirect in a positive way eg 'Let's go and get a drink of water'. Consider seeking support for managing behaviour early so you can keep the focus on teaching the skills your child or student needs.
Ignoring cues and directions	I am too anxious to be able to listen. I can only retain one direction at a time at most, as there is too much going around in my head. I might have trouble understanding what is said to me.	<p><b>For younger children</b> Have a predictable routine for the day for any group activities, sleep time, etc. Only give one direction at a time.</p> <p><b>For older children and young people</b> Keep the structure of the day and of lessons the same. Describe the outline of activities at the start. Provide one-step instructions and ensure they have been understood. Provide learning prompts e.g. regular verbal reminders of next steps or a visual prompt such as a checklist on a mini-whiteboard.</p>
Appears withdrawn. Unable to keep and make friends. Bullies others.	I have to rely on myself and nobody else. Others let me down. I respond to fear or threat by withdrawing into myself and shutting out the world – it feels safer there. I try to make myself feel strong and safe by making others do what I want.	<p><b>For younger children</b> Encourage the child to play alongside other children, facilitate their entry into play and reinforce positive interactions with other children.</p> <p><b>For older children and young people</b> Introduce a buddy system and/or peer mentoring. Encourage the child to help around school. Build lots of opportunities for collaborative work into the day. Teach and celebrate good teamwork skills. Encourage participation in after-school clubs. Introduce a 'Buddy Bench' in the playground and explain its intention.</p>
Difficulties settling to any activity or concentrating, fidgeting, turning around	I am always worrying. I must look out for threats and dangers all the time. I am hyper-aroused and vigilant so that I can spot threats and keep myself safe. It's not safe to relax or let my guard down.	<p>Children in care can be very sensitive to others' emotional level; use the volume and tone of your voice and your body language to help reduce their tension level. Give them something calming to hold e.g. a fidget toy, soft cloth or support them to take movement breaks and then come back to the learning task</p> <p><b>For older children and young people</b> Seat the student in a position where they can see the whole class including the door, but where you can make contact with them regularly.</p>
Behaves inappropriately in 'busy' areas of the early learning service or school e.g. at the start of the day, in the playground or at lunch time	I panic in crowds. When it is noisy and busy there's so much going on in my mind that I can't think straight so I react without thinking. I am completely overwhelmed.	<p><b>For younger children</b> Encourage a consistent settling routine at the beginning of each day or session.</p> <p><b>For older children and young people</b> Plan ahead for potentially challenging times, for example, ask the child to arrive in school 5 minutes early or late and allow them to leave the class at transitions ahead of others. Keep break times shorter if these are continually problematic – look for opportunities for monitor jobs or indoor, supervised activities during these times (e.g. board games club).</p>

# For leaders of early learning services me ngā kohanga reo, Kura and school

A whole-of-service or school approach will ensure strong systems and processes are in place to support children, young people, educators and carers.



- **Have systems and policies in place for how information is shared**, who needs to know what and the best ways to support the child or young person, while respecting the child or young person's privacy.
- **Carers, particularly Grandparents, may have had different experiences of education themselves.** They may need further information, discussion and support around engaging with the child or young person's education
- **Be aware of possible financial constraints for carers**
- **Enrolment is a good time to have a conversation about the child or young person's strengths, interests, aspirations and challenges.** It's a good idea to ask about the reasons for going into care, any health issues, and the long term plan for the child or young person e.g. reintegration into whānau, so transitions can be planned for. Alongside this, sharing cultural information such as whānau, hāpu and iwi, whakapapa, languages spoken, also supports the child or young person. Every child going into care has a Gateway assessment, information from this assessment should be part of ongoing discussion.
- **Plan for transitions, including looking at options, choices and pathways that reflect the child or young person's interests and aspirations.** Support for transitions is pivotal, and it may be appropriate to involve the caregiver, social worker and/or Oranga Tamariki to make plans for how the appropriate support can occur.
- **Having a liaison person for the carer, and/or a communication book** that goes between school and home helps with sharing information and giving consistent messages to the child or young person
- **Create opportunities for the voice of the child or young person** to be heard and included in planning and decision making
- **Develop a whānau education plan**, which captures the child or young person's goals and aspirations for their learning
- **All staff who come into contact with the child or young person may need support and training** in responding appropriately and consistently in ways that enrich the child or young person's environment. This might include information for relievers, training for reception staff, and guidance for staff at break times.
- **Finally, look after yourself and your staff.** Strong emotions can be triggered in educators and carers as they support children and young people, particularly at transition points. Acknowledge this is tough, work together as a team, and support each other's wellbeing

# For Students in a Secondary School Setting or Wharekura



Again, every young person is unique. For adolescent students in care attending a secondary school, some additional indicators will need considered responses which will come under the school's behaviour management, attendance, pastoral care and health and safety policies and their guidelines/procedures. The following suggestions may be helpful.

CATEGORY	WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE	SOME STRATEGIES TO TRY
<b>Transition/Enrolment</b>	<p>An enrolment meeting is the best time to begin gathering the information critical to a successful transition to secondary school.</p> <p>The student self-limits their options for subject selection.</p>	<p>Involve the school's pastoral team, guardian/caregiver, social worker and the student. Ask open questions so carers and students can share their stories early on in ways that support their engagement. Develop a transition plan where all at the meeting have an input and agree on who communicates with the caregiver when this might occur and for what purpose.</p> <p>Identify a buddy who can help them find their way around the school.</p> <p>For new students, a sensitive and proactive approach to ensure that subjects of interest are chosen where possible.</p>
<b>Attendance</b>	<p>Patterns of unexplained absence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lateness to school/class</li> <li>• Period absence</li> <li>• Missing whole days or extended periods of time off school</li> </ul>	<p>Timely and accurate data is required in order to uncover trends in attendance and areas that may signal the need for more support.</p> <p>Communicate to the caregiver/guardian and social worker as soon as a pattern emerges. A timely response is critical.</p> <p>Involve the Deans or Senior Management and advise the Guidance team/SENCO if the student has received their support.</p> <p>Periodic subject absences may need to involve a discussion with the curriculum leader of the subject</p>
<b>Engagement</b>	<p>Patterns of behaviours in addition to those described above could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of basic equipment</li> <li>• Reluctance to engage in class with peers/teacher</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Anger in response to reasoned requests</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Unmet deadlines</li> <li>• Self-harm</li> </ul>	<p>Focus on student engagement early on and in an ongoing way. Scaffold your student to stay at and succeed at school. Make sure they are not disengaged, particularly for minor reasons such as not having the right equipment or uniform, or not knowing how to follow social rules or norms.</p> <p>It is important that the student knows your expectations and that these are reinforced by their consistent application as part of your classroom management repertoire. Beyond this, the school's behaviour code of conduct will guide your next steps.</p> <p>Most of these in-class behaviours may indicate a rising level of disengagement and would need to be discussed with the curriculum leader or Dean if you are concerned. Guidance involvement will be required if a deeper level of support is required.</p> <p>If contact with Caregiver/Guardian and/or social worker is necessary, this will take place in accordance with the protocols in place in the school.</p>
<b>Achievement</b>	<p>Students may have low expectations of themselves as learners. While summative indicators will signal end point achievement, formative indicators as the assessment period progresses through milestones will indicate where the best interventions to support the student may be made.</p>	<p>Create opportunities to acknowledge small everyday steps towards learning and achievement. Link new learning with the students' interests and current skills and scaffold social relationships so the student can focus on the learning.</p> <p>For NCEA Achievement Standards that are internally assessed, ensure that the student receives and has understood the processes and procedures contained in the school's Guidelines for Managing Assessment. It is advisable to keep whānau updated at regular intervals and to advise them in a timely manner if milestones during the assessment period are not being met.</p> <p>Opportunities for resubmission and reassessment need to be discussed.</p> <p>Subject teachers need to make these procedures explicit to students and support students to follow these during the assessment period.</p> <p>Special assessment conditions may be appropriate, talk to the learning support coordinator or another leader, with responsibility for learning support, in your school.</p>

# For further information:

Here is a list of further resources to assist educators and carers:



## **Te Kete Ipurangi website (TKI)**

<http://inclusive.tki.org.nz/>

## **Calmer Classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children.**

<http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/pdfs/calmer-classrooms-guide.pdf>

**Learn the Child: Helping looked after children to learn (2013).** Kate Cairns and Chris Stanway. British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

**What About Me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day** (2011). Louise Bomber. Worth Publishing.

## **Making Space for Learning: Trauma Informed practice in Schools.**

<https://www.theactgroup.com.au/documents/makingspaceforlearning-traumainschools.pdf>

## **Literature Review: A trauma-sensitive approach for children aged 0-8 years (2012).**

<http://www.whealth.com.au/documents/work/trauma/LiteratureReview.pdf>