

## CHAPTER 2

### What trauma does to a child's brain (life)

Because of the serious problems PTSD war veterans brought home with them, we know the reality of what trauma does to a brain and the person that owns it.

These same PTSD realities affecting soldiers are beginning to be understood as they apply to children and youth that have grown up with rape, beatings, neglect and other extended exposure to violence and deprivation.

Courts and law enforcement are trying to respond more empathetically to the violent and bizarre behaviors veterans suffering from PTSD are capable of.

In some courts, restorative justice is replacing prison for crimes committed by veterans as judges acknowledge the long-term mental health damage of war and trauma.

Most courts recognize that readjusting to a new life with the trauma of a broken brain is more likely to occur if a healing model is used in place of a detention center or prison sentence.

Trauma remaps the brain. This new map redirects input from the thinking part of the brain to the amygdala.

The amygdala is the flight or fight part of the brain and it performs a primary role in emergency decision-making and emotional responses (including fear, anxiety and aggression).

It has been referred to as the oldest part of the brain and the reptilian part of the brain.

Rates of suicide, self-harm, violence and crime are

significantly higher in veteran populations of traumatized soldiers just as they are higher in populations of children suffering from child abuse and trauma (ACES, Adverse Childhood Experiences).

Children are literally helpless when repeated neglect, beatings, rape or other violence occur.

The thinking part of their brain can't stop the trauma.

That part of the brain gives up its function to the amygdala or reptilian part of the brain.

Physically and mentally, traumatized children develop differently than their peers with behavioral and biological changes that never go away.

With help, these changes can be managed but hard-wired trauma is a real thing that doesn't evaporate when a child is removed from the abusive environment.

Just as a veteran's traumas don't evaporate when they return home from their violent surroundings.

Traumatized soldiers have a past, their "normal" that they work towards recapturing.

Veterans have no desire to hurt themselves or the people around them. Their behaviors are the hard-wired outcomes of an altered brain.

That's the nature of PTSD and toxic stress.

Abused and neglected children do not have the mental capacity to understand what is happening to them.

And even if they know, who would you tell? Your parents are the primary authority in your life as a child – they make the rules.

Abused children have a toxic past that was their “normal”.

It's the only normal they have. To an abused child, their homelife is all they know. Regardless of how neglectful, painful or abusive it is.

That normal must be recognized and changed for them to lead a healthy life.

This change doesn't just happen.

Toxic families don't provide useful instruction to the child for learning or socialization that will deliver them a healthy life.

There was no book delivered to you on your fifth birthday listing the skills you will need or explain how the things that have been done to you are wrong.

You may never know that what was done to you were criminal acts that could be prosecuted.

When discovery begins to happen to an abused child, their world is shaken to the core.

Abused children become aware of how unlike others they are when they enter school. When the social mask falls off, the hardest awakening usually comes in their teens when a child becomes super-aware of how different she/he is from her/his classmates and peers.

No one they know grew up in home a like theirs. School aged youth can be cruel – especially to kids deemed “different”. Social media lends itself well to those that have access to reading and writing skills and the opposite is true for kids that don't have those skills.

Their peers have skills and behaviors are different in important ways. Reading, communication and social skills come easy to children whose parents have them and share them with their children.

Kids with violent dads, abusive boyfriends, drug using moms and poverty start far behind in the classroom. One of this CASA GAL's caseload seven year old's had a vocabulary of no more than ten words when I met her.

For traumatized children, socialization, learning in school and mental development take a back seat to processing repeated traumatic personal experience and the behaviors that come with it.

Sitting still in a classroom with the calmness and quiet attention required for learning is a luxury almost unknown among traumatized children. Anxiety and growing awareness of "how different I am" than the others is a constant stress.

Reading at grade level is common for most 3rd and 4th graders – not so for children living with repeated trauma and normalized anxiety.

This NIH study shows them reading with 30% to 40 % of the reading skills of their peers.

Math and social skills are a major problem for anxiety ridden children that are unable to sit quietly in a classroom.

They struggle to keep up but it's hard for children that lack a safe and calm home life where parents help their children learn and grow.

When at risk children go home, their parents are often

making their lives painful and fearful.

To be fair, their parents generally came from homes where helpful skills and mindsets didn't exist for them as children either. Generational child abuse is what is driving the problems. Hard to measure without data and seldom spoken of, generational child abuse is growing rapidly during the COVID lockdowns.

In school or online, feeling anxious about their struggle and shortcomings, at risk youth often quit trying.

Their basic skills are minimal or absent and their mind set is one of failure and anxiety coupled with low self-esteem, depressive thinking and self-hate.

Authority figures are a big problem for children that have been abused and traumatized by the most important authority figure in their life.

As the child spends more time in the community teachers and law enforcement can quickly become perceived as just one more authority figure of pain and cruelty.

To be fair to the people in the roles of authority, America is steeped in centuries old punishment models in child raising, education and law enforcement that trigger more pain, fear and hate.

Discipline and punishment is how we the people were raised ourselves.

Empathetic teachers that work hard at connecting with and building trust with a troubled child will have a better chance seeing the child through one more year inside the classroom than someone married to the punishment model.

One more brick in the wall is the vernacular for identifying how children build walls that make them outcasts in school, with peers and the community.

They don't feel they belong and we prove it by expelling them and a hundred other ways of practicing punishment instead of empathy and a path to participation and healing.

Self-hate is common among foster children.

Unpredictable, sometimes explosive trauma and behavior problems set abused children them apart from their classmates. Their troubling behavior earn them more discipline and punishment, sometimes expulsion often incarceration.

Most abused children never see a social worker because most child abuse is never reported. Most youth do not talk about their abuse and few children recognize the source of their troubling behaviors, depression or high anxiety. Many abused children go to their grave without telling anyone what happened to them.

Abused children often believe they are responsible for the things that happened to them and the breakup of their families by the court.

They feel guilt and personal failure for wrecking their family.

Self-destructive thinking and feelings of inadequacy combine with broken trust issues to make peer interactions and friendships really hard for these kids. Who to trust and how much is a huge problem for children the most important authority figure in their life is causing them great harm.

It takes immense efforts for teachers, foster parents and others that are trying to grow a relationship with traumatized children - and it doesn't always work.

It's difficult to convey what not being able to trust and love, something that come easily to most people becomes a mental health road block to abused children.

It is not rare that traumatized children fail to grow into healthy trusting relationships (ever).

Behind in school, full of self-hate, with few friends and often in trouble with authority and stuck in toxic home environments they make more bad choices. Conditions are ripe for doing dumb things and trusting the wrong people.

An overactive amygdala sees danger everywhere and attendant erratic sometimes violent behaviors.

Underdeveloped critical thinking skills can make children super sensitive to their perceived failures with the low self esteem that comes with it.

Untreated, both children and veterans live long lives with a remapped brains and mental health and behavior problems that cause them more stress and more problems in the home and with their peers and community.

Because America's approach to mental health has been expensive and unavailable to so many for so long, not many traumatized children have found a path to regular healing resources.

Most child abuse is never known or if known, properly addressed.

Psychotropic medications have long been the less

expensive go to treatment used to treat symptoms.

There is plenty of evidence to show that the wholesale use of these drug is not a best practices approach to healing at risk children.

Many children are forced onto Prozac like drugs when their behaviors become dangerous or teachers, law enforcement and parents decide it “would just easier to manage the child when medicated”.

This has lifelong consequences. The prisons are full of juvenile justice youth turned adult and the juvenile justice system is full of youth delivered by the child protection system.

To be fair, when no other affordable and effective answers are available, these drugs have worked to keep violent children from harming themselves and others.

Teachers and foster/adoptive families have had few alternatives dealing with violent children and youth.

About 1/3 of foster children are forced onto psychotropic medications in America. About 2/3 of youth in Juvenile Justice have diagnosable mental illness with half that number experiencing multiple, chronic and dangerous diagnosis.

The science of epigenetics has proven that childhood trauma manifests itself in how our genes express themselves. This unhappy reality means there is a likelihood that a child raised in a violent and abusive home will have a disposition to pass on genetic material to his or her children that include undesirable PTSD traits abused children own.



This unbroken chain of teen and preteen moms without parenting skills, drug problems and violent boyfriends too often begins the next generation of trauma and domestic violence that repeats until the community steps in to interrupt the abuse and save and heal a child.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, ACES, destroy not just the childhood & life chances of one more boy or girl but the lives of people in her/his life (impacting taxpayers, teachers, law enforcement and crime victims) and an increased probability of passing on the negative traits of trauma to their grandchildren.

Data;

PreCOVID, about one third of foster children were required to take psychotropic medicines like Prozac.

Foster children are at least 2.5 times more likely to be involved in the Justice System & 90% of youth with five or more foster placements will enter the Justice System.

85% of the youth in Juvenile Justice are functionally low literate. 70% of incarcerated adults cannot read at a fourth grade level. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among American teens. (Team, we need more research on suicide attempts and self-harm by children and youth.

There is very little available reporting of information

about how many child suicides (or adults suiciding because child abuse) or self-harming acts are committed by at risk children.

This author experienced half a dozen child suicide attempts over 12 years as a CASA guardian ad litem. One of them, by a six year old foster girl, was successful.

Of America's 80 million children in America, & 30% of them will be arrested by their 23rd birthday

80% of youth aging out of foster care lead dysfunctional lives

They also die 20 years earlier than their peers that lead normal lives (CDC Stevens 2009)

Minnesota's former Supreme Court Chief Justice Kathleen Blatz has stated, "the difference between that poor child and a felon, is about eight years". Justice Blatz also posits that "90% of the youth in juvenile justice have come through child protective services".

By 2017 more than 13% of 12 to 25 year old Americans had symptoms consistent with an episode of major depression in the previous year – a 62% increase in 8 years.

ACE study from 2006 criminality\* in families; These are the children that will become the 8% of adolescents who commit up to 70% of all serious and violent juvenile crime. ACE research indicates that serious and violent delinquency may be concentrated in just 2-4% of families. This points to the importance of early identification through the ACE Program. We know who these children are, where they live and what they need. We have the resources to help them lead nor-

mal lives, succeed in school and become contributing members of the community.

It's exponentially more expensive to ignore them than it is to help them. ACE research shows a strong historical pattern of criminality in families of child delinquents. Using Cohen's estimates, we calculate the multi-generational "multiplier effect" to be between \$3.4 and \$11.5 million. In these families, criminality is likely to grow exponentially.

