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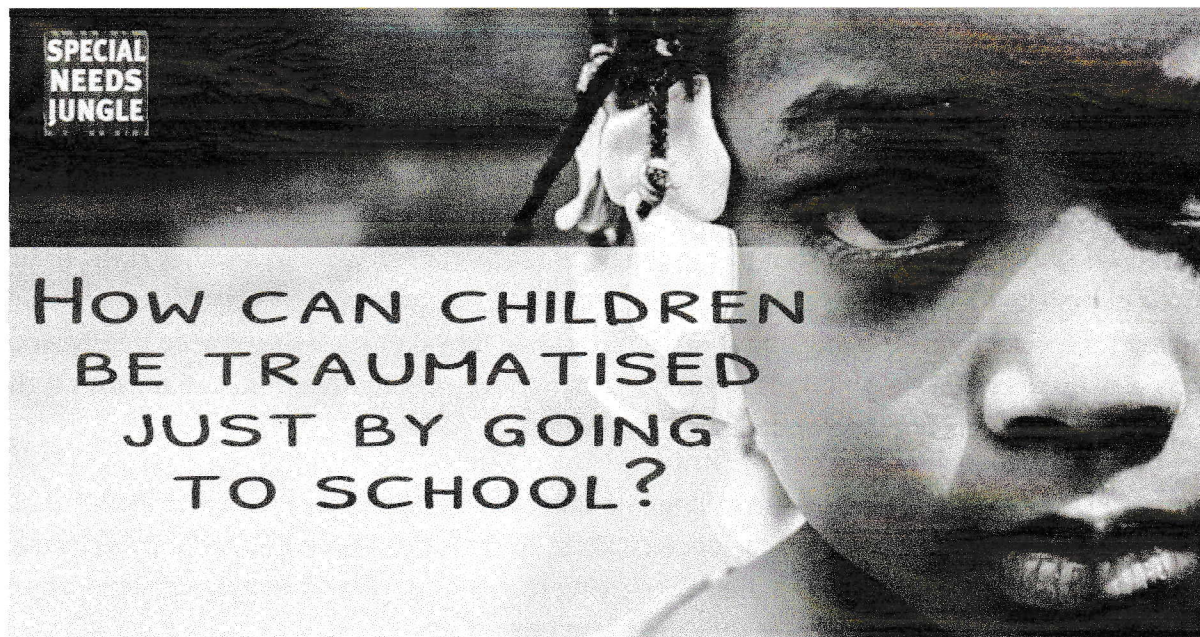
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How can children be traumatised just by going to school?

By Angela Kelly

🕒 January 29, 2019



In a post titled [Send Children Being Traumatized By Not Getting Help Needed in School](https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/send-children-being-traumatized-by-not-getting-help-needed-in-school/)

(<https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/send-children-being-traumatized-by-not-getting-help-needed-in-school/>), Tania recently touched on the subject of SEN children becoming traumatised by the education system. She wrote about the recent education select committee roundtable which was attended by school heads, teachers and SENCos and one particular statement upset her:

"We're getting a high influx of students coming in [to his school] with high level of institutional trauma, rather than life-long developmental trauma,"

Callum Wetherill, Pastoral Leader, of Joseph Norton Academy

It sounds ridiculous doesn't it? Children being traumatised just by attending school, a place that is supposed to embrace, nurture, and teach our children, helping them to develop into confident, purposeful adults?

And, I expect this is what happens, in the main, but personally speaking, I wouldn't know. Those of you who have read my previous posts know that my older son, who is autistic, was unable to attend school for nearly four years and was labelled a 'school refuser'.

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"Low-level disruptors"

So what about our children with SEND? What happens to the ones who create what is known as 'low level disruption', who struggle to attend to their lessons, but who are deemed to be preventing others in the class from learning. The children who are repeatedly sent to see the head teacher, or to work in another class, or told to 'think about' their behaviour? These same children who, at break, either cannot cope with the unstructured time (possibly spending time in lessons worrying about upcoming break times) or have become so tightly wound by trying so very hard in lessons that they explode at break and cannot control themselves. And of course, this then may mean they lose break times because of their 'bad behaviour'.

And then there are the "hidden" ones who say nothing and quietly smile their way through the day, until they get home. Or the ones who are told they are making 'poor choices', or the ones who are repeatedly teased and bullied because they can't fit in, who spend all their time trying to work out what is 'wrong' with them because they so desperately want friends, but whatever they do doesn't work.

How do they manage? How do they cope? What impact does experiencing an environment like this every day have on a child?

It's a tough - and different - world for children

If you look at it in adult terms, what would be your first thought? Would an adult manage in an environment like that day in, day out, knowing that attendance is compulsory and if they don't go they'll either be fined or get a criminal record? Imagine how that would increase an adult's anxiety. Would they get better? Get over it and manage? Maybe some could, but most wouldn't.

I remember many years ago when I moved jobs, my new manager thought it was hilarious to talk about women as though they were objects. He refused to train me on the company's computer system and would then humiliate me in front of my colleagues when I made mistakes. I hated it and recall I made my decision to leave when I used to cry on a Sunday evening, knowing I had to go to work the next day. Imagine if I had made that choice and then I was told it was impossible, I had to go in and if I didn't I would lose all my privileges. No TV, no going out, no phone, nothing that made life worthwhile!

Thankfully I did have a choice and could move jobs to work in an environment that was not shameful, humiliating and ultimately **traumatising**. **Our children do not have that choice and as a result their mental health starts to suffer**

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Mental health and trauma

We know that half of all mental health problems (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-children-and-young-people>) are established by age 14. 10% of children have a clinically diagnosable mental illness (and no, this does not include autism or ADHD, as these are NOT mental illnesses) **but that 70% of those children have not had appropriate early intervention.**

So where does trauma fit here? What is trauma? Can attending an environment such as school cause PTSD? In my professional opinion, as a counsellor, absolutely believe it can.

There are differences in the types of trauma that can be experienced and these are split into a trauma continuum

- Type one Trauma – single incident trauma e.g. car accident
- Type Two Trauma – multiple traumas for example – abuse, domestic violence
- Type Three Trauma – multiple pervasive trauma from an early age that continues over a length of time
- (Trauma Recovery Centre, 2019)

The NHS describes trauma (PTSD) (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/>) as **an anxiety** (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/>) disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or

distressing events. How many of our children would describe the daily attendance of school as one or both of the above?

How many of us, as parents, have witnessed our children dissolve into panic when school is mentioned? Whose children have sleep problems because they are either worried about school the next day or they are worried about the weekend going too quickly and Monday arriving? The only time you see them begin to relax is the summer holidays and then, as September approaches, the anxiety creeps back in. Difficulties in getting uniform, refusal to go shoe shopping, constantly checking how many days till school and any mention of the 'S' word sending them into blind panic.

Children with neurodevelopmental disabilities such as autism, already have difficulties with social communication and interaction and those who are deemed 'high functioning' often attend mainstream school. As a result, they are starting out with a disadvantage over their peers as they experience the world differently. Some children go into school without a diagnosis and are completely unprepared for what school is. Some mask their autism to 'fit in', others use behaviour to communicate a need for support, while some stay very quiet hoping no-one will notice them

Imagine living in a country where the language you speak is different from the majority of people living there. That occasionally you understand each other but this is infrequent, so much of your time is spent trying to work out what they are saying so you know what to do. You make many mistakes in your attempts to 'get it right' and some people may become cross and frustrated because they don't realise you're unable to understand them. Add to this you're trying to process the environment, different noises and smells and the unpredictable behaviour of other people. And learn what is being taught. This creates anxiety and is happening every day. But you still have to live there and you're still expected to do the same as the others..

Luke Beardon sums up the impact this will have on our children brilliantly in his podcast [The three golden rules for teaching autistic children](https://www.tes.com/news/three-golden-rules-supporting-autistic-pupils). (<https://www.tes.com/news/three-golden-rules-supporting-autistic-pupils>) To hear him speak of the potential trauma that our young people may experience you need to forward to approximately 27 minutes, although I would encourage you to listen to the whole thing as it is so interesting. He also writes that, *"trust can be difficult for autistic individuals due to "experiencing years of being lied to, chastised or traumatised just for being right"*.

I would like to think that people don't intend to behave that way to autistic pupils, but that it is because they don't fully understand the condition. Autistic pupils are expected to conform to the norms of a school environment which will eventually, for a proportion of our children, cause trauma.

Asperger's expert, Tony Attwood, recently wrote a blog on ['school refusal'](https://attwoodandgarnettevents.com/2018/11/29/school-refusal-by-professor-tony-attwood/) (<https://attwoodandgarnettevents.com/2018/11/29/school-refusal-by-professor-tony-attwood/>) and while I feel there are many helpful suggestions in his post to provide support, the terminology needs to change - to suggest that not attending school for a prolonged period is a choice is so very wrong and further damaging and degrading. We need to adopt appropriate terminology such as 'school-induced trauma' or as coined above 'Institutional trauma' and start providing the treatment care and support that these young people so desperately need and deserve.

Doesn't sound so ridiculous now does it?

Useful links