

## **Neglected Basic Needs of Troubled Young People**

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In every culture in the world, the needs of young children are taken very seriously, and everyone makes it their business to nurture and protect young people. The only exceptions are when order and cultural values are replaced by war, extreme poverty and environments where survival is not insured for anyone, including children. But everywhere else adults talk about insuring that children are provided basic needs. But do we all have the same idea of what the basic needs of children are? This is a question that has not received enough attention. When we think we all have the same understanding of the basic needs of children, it is very possible that we are mistaken and for some children in some settings there happen to be important basic needs that are overlooked. When this happens, neglected children are not only hurt by the adults who are responsible for their well-being, but in a real sense the society itself can be guilty of neglecting what children need and deserve.

This article takes the position that in our western society, particularly for children who have unfortunately experienced abuse and neglect, our system of care, that is designed to insure the basic needs of all children, is actually overlooking a number of basic needs to the detriment of the very children the system is designed to protect.

Ask any adults to identify the basic needs of children and to a person they will accurately describe such basic needs as: food, water, clothing, adequate sanitation, healthy air to breathe, shelter and protections from any and all threats in the environment. And this is a very good list, but it is not complete because there are children who are provided all of the above and still are hampered by the lack of some very important basic needs and these children are abused, neglected and traumatized children. All children should be alike when it comes to basic needs and for the most part this is true. However, some children who have had the misfortune of being deprived basic needs in the past, things are not the same. Some needs are in fact the same, but the amount of some needs that are often assumed cannot be taken for granted for traumatized children if we want to give them the best chance at a positive future. Therefore, the following list of neglected basic needs are actually the same for all children, but often end up being neglected much more often with traumatized children who are raised in some component of our system of care.

### **Stability**

Providing safety to children would be mentioned by most adults as one the most essential basic needs. Without safety all the other basic needs can do little to ensure survival--which is the very definition of a basic need. But when our systems of care for children correctly emphasizes safety, it often overlooks stability. We all know what safety entails, but is stability as clearly understood? Stability involves issues very essential to the well-being of children with traumatic

past experiences. These include predictability, belonging, structure and being able to count on adults to manage adult responsibilities so the child can focus on what a child's job is—to learn and to have fun. Stability is being able to count on the environment to provide predictability, so the child does not experience the anxiety of not knowing what to expect next. Anxiety can quickly take precedence with the unknown, not only for children but for adults as well.

Stability is an essential component of a child's ability to attach and bond to a primary care provider. When a child bonds with someone who the child can count on, the bond strengthens and forms the foundation of future attachments to family, friends and eventually life-long partnerships. Helping a child attach to another human being in a positive way is one of the best predictors of a positive adulthood because we need others in our lives to reach the best outcomes.

Many adults believe that children like surprises, such as presents or surprise parties or event. However, this is not the case for all children. For young people who have been unable to live in a predictable environment, surprises create bad rather than good anxiety and surprises are things to avoid. Stability is enhanced by structure and routine and when a child cannot count on a familiar routine, this can often lead to mental health problems. Stability is enhanced by consistency, which naturally lowers anxiety and stress that can consume some children who have had a traumatic past.

The final comment on this first often neglected basic need is when our system of care rushes in to save a child from safety threats, we seldom fully understand that our efforts to ensure safety nearly always jeopardizes stability. How often does our child protective service system remove children from an unsafe environment only to move that same child again and again in kinship care or foster placements. Each time a child is uprooted from a predictable home, we neglect the child's basic need for stability. Take any young plant and pull it up by the roots to replant it and you will find that when this is done enough times the young plant stops growing. Children in our system of care often experience multiple or even dozens of placements, and each time a placement disrupts for any reason, the basic need of stability is neglected to the detriment of the child's well-being.

## **Love**

Adults often forget to add love to the essential basic needs of children. One reason for this is that most children are provided love starting well before birth and continuing through the life span. But not all children start their lives with the love they need, and when this happens the chances of missing out on love at each step of development vastly increases. Well-being can be considered a fabric that is made up of many fibers. The synergy of all the fibers together makes the fabric exponentially stronger. When it comes to children, well-being is a fabric made up of fibers such as safety, belonging, attachment, stability, acceptance, trust and many other threads that when woven together are many times stronger than any one fiber by itself. Some wise men, the Beatles, once said "All you need is love." They were only partially correct. It

turns out that love is important but only as the foundation upon which we build the structure of a self-assured individual with a quality life.

Since most children start life with the love they need, in our system of care we often do not realize the children who lacked love from the start have an enhanced basic need for love and yet love is one of the most neglected aspects of our substitute care system. We can provide food, shelter and clothing but without love all the rest can mean little to many traumatized children.

### **Touch**

Closely related to a child's basic need for love is caring touch. No adult would ever question the need for touch for a child in a caring family. Regardless of the culture, no child would ever be raised without constant loving touch. Touch is the first language of all children. More than enough research studies have been done on what happens to both animals and humans when touch is neglected. And yet you only need to consider our western society to see how often touch is questioned and even prohibited. Teachers are taught to either be very careful including touch in the teaching process or to avoid it altogether. Foster parents are cautioned about most forms of touch when helping a child who has come from a history of physical or sexual abuse. When touch is considered as an important basic need, it only makes sense that children who have experienced abusive touch actually need positive loving more than other children. However, some treatment programs for abused children say with pride that they have a "hands off" environment for troubled young people. From a basic needs perspective this is short sighted. What most of these treatment programs mean by 'hands off' is they do not use physical means to contain children when they become out of control and dangerous to themselves and others. Isn't it logical to see that when a child loses self-control is precisely the time the child needs a supportive adult to take control and insure safety? And yet systems of care throughout the United States are very clear that touch should be used sparingly if ever with troubled children. Again from a basic needs perspective, this makes little to no sense and is yet another way we neglect an essential basic need of troubled children.

### **Joy**

It is unlikely that you will find joy on any other list of basic needs. However, all an adult need do to see the integral aspect of joy in childhood is to watch young children on a playground, or the smile on the face of a very young child as the child watches you make a funny face and then smiles with delight. Joy is what childhood years are all about, with the primary job of a child being to learn and have fun. Fun and joy are the same to a child. This is before they will eventually learn the critical aspect of competition and someone must win and someone therefore must lose, which is what adults call play. But before play turns into athletic warfare, joy is the goal, the process and the product. No one need lose on the playground and everyone can just lose themselves in the experience of play and joy.

If there is one experience unavailable to children who have experienced trauma it is the experience of joy. Abused children completely lose the ability to play and therefore experience fun and joy. This is seldom mentioned but may be one of the most damaging aspect of trauma. If you lose joy, then you lose your childhood and your ability to be childlike. Play and joy are one of the best ways for an individual to recharge or what is true re-creation. Joy not only brings the best experience to a child, it also reduces stress and anxiety. If we want to ensure that a child has the ability to experience childhood, then we must ensure that joy is a part of their experience and therefore a basic need of all children.

### **Learning**

Also infrequently mentioned as a basic need, learning is one of the two primary tasks for a child—learning and playing. Learning includes all the aspects of negotiating the complex world that a child finds all around. Children can learn to function with nurturing families, and they can also learn to survive in the most dysfunctional family environments. A child cannot help but learn, which is the primary reason it is not generally considered a basic need. But the basic need of learning is the opportunity to acquire functional information and skills to be able to not only survive but to thrive. When a child's brain is primarily focused on how to survive in an unsafe and unsupportive family situation, the child's brain prioritizes learning to only those issues that can be directly connected with immediate survival. For such a child, nearly all the information and learning that will be needed to be successful in the long-term will be relegated to irrelevant issues. Children in this situation will struggle greatly in school because what, if anything, in school will help the child survive in an unsafe home? This is one of the reasons that a traumatic childhood is directly correlated to learning problems and disabilities when the child reaches school age.

The aspect of learning that is a basic need is not how to survive, since the brain will do this regardless of the situation, the basic need is to be able to learn all that will be necessary to negotiate a complex world and have the best opportunity to thrive and find success.

### **Hope**

The basic fact of existence is that we are born, we live and then we die. Every life has this unavoidable reality. What gives every individual the ability to look beyond the inevitable conclusion of life and make the best of the time we have is hope. Hope is also something seldom considered a basic need, but for a child who is primarily focused on survival, hope is a need to strive for more than survival and is something that all children deserve. It is very difficult for a traumatized child to move beyond the world they know to consider that perhaps living can be a positive experience. The child can know nothing other than what the child has actually experienced, and if this is abuse and neglect, it will require an act of faith to hope that things can improve. Faith has little to do with survival, so it is not something that comes naturally to the traumatized child. Therefore, hope will require the specific intervention of a caring adult. Such a hope must start with the adult being hopeful that the child can improve,

can do better and can find a way to a successful life. Without the adult being hopeful, there is little to no chance the basic need of hope will be provided to the child.

### **Healing from Past Abuse**

The only children who have this basic need of healing from abuse are those who have been subjected to abuse and neglect in the first place. Most adults view healing as an instinctive, and for the most part, involuntary act. For example, when someone falls down and scrapes the skin on knees and elbows, what effort is required of the individual for healing other than to keep the wound clean? The healing process is something we all experience as involuntary and automatic. Not so for the mental and emotional healing from trauma. If past abuse is not successfully addressed, then the individual will be relegated to reliving the pain and the experience of trauma along with all the negative symptoms that come with trauma. When someone is simply trying to stay above water and survive, there is little left over to facilitate healing. Healing from abuse is only a basic need for the unfortunate children who were abused, but without this basic need, the consequences of trauma will continue for years, if not for a lifetime.

This has been an increased focus over the last decade in “trauma informed” interventions. However, being informed is not good enough. Complex trauma is generally understood to be, well, complex. The easiest thing to do when something is complicated is to avoid it. Too many mental health providers find a reason not to start the complex and challenging journey of trauma treatment and recovery. There are plenty of excuses such as: not enough time, not the focus of treatment, not what is being asked for, and leaving this delicate work to someone more experienced and qualified. However, when mental health workers take a pass on complex trauma work, too often the result is no one helps the child or provides this basic need.

### **Self-expression**

This is also something seldom considered a basic need. Most children need little encouragement to express what they are feeling, but this is not the case for many traumatized children. If an environment puts the child at risk if they cry out, the brain will insure that expression is secondary to survival. So once again self-expression, although very important for children, may only be considered a basic need for traumatized children. To facilitate the healing journey, adults who strive to help children express their painful past must be prepared for the challenges involved. Unlike healthy children, traumatized children often do not discriminate between adults. If the child is angry at an uncle, then the anger will likely be directed at the therapist or foster parent. Regardless, healing requires expression. Once our culture mistakenly believed that the best response to a major loss was to pick yourself up and move on. Grief work has shown us that the road to healing a significant death in our life is to express raw and real emotions related to the loss. Not only does expression give us a release from pent up emotions, but it actually has a healing element. Adults frequently work to dampen expression from children—‘lower your voice’, ‘you don’t need to cry about that,’ etc,

However we must do the opposite for children healing from trauma. For traumatized children self-expression is a basic need and any individual or program that strives to help a traumatized child heal must allow for a significant amount of expression of the pain inside.

### **Self-determination—Personal Control**

A fundamental aspect of all code of ethics is to promote self-determination with clients, meaning the individual is helped to be the author of their own story to the degree possible. It is not the goal of psychological therapy to know best what the client wants and talk them into doing what you want for them. The ethical goal is to facilitate the client working toward having the confidence to believe in one's own ability to determine life's direction. Working with traumatized children is an experience of running into the child's continual need for control. Typically this comes out in all the wrong ways—'I want to do it my way', 'Don't tell me what to do,' 'I don't want to go to the doctor.' Control for many traumatized children is a fundamental need. This is true for most people, but for traumatized young people the lack of control from their past puts an extra emphasis on the drive for control and self-determination.

### **Physical and Mental Health**

Yet another basic need that is seldom identified as such other than by the World Health Organization is the ability to have to the degree possible physical and mental health. Within the last few decades these two needs have become more intertwined and recognized as impacting each other. It is unlikely that any individual can live their entire life achieving uninterrupted physical and mental health, but all children and adults deserve to have the resources to maximize both. Without some level of physical health, it is very difficult to pursue other aspirations in life; and without mental health an individual may have huge impediments to achieving one's full potential. While physical and mental health cannot be assured to everyone at any age, all children deserve to have the best physical and mental health possible and thus this can be considered a basic need for children.

The final three needs are generally not considered basic but rather higher order needs and closer to the top of Maslow's hierarchy.

**Reaching their full potential** – for many individuals including traumatized young people, the rigors of daily living supersede higher order needs that often seem out of reach. This can stifle both creativity as well as dampening the belief that the person's talents and ability can be used to improve their experience in life and creating the type of life they would love to have. All children deserve to have an opportunity to reach their optimal potential.

**Personal Contentment** – The final needs that will be mentioned are primarily a matter of an internal state of mind. All the previous needs can be available to an individual and yet personal contentment is not assured. However, it is very unlikely that without most of the previous basic needs an individual is highly unlikely to achieve higher order needs

such as personal contentment. When it comes to traumatized children, our system of care has an increased responsibility to make up for the early lives of abuse and neglect and provide these young people with an understanding and a path to personal contentment. The best way to do this is through personal modeling by the adults who strive to help these young people. One of the advantages of helping troubled young people is the pressure to personally live a life rich in positive attributes such as personal contentment. This is only one of the many ways that helping troubled young people is an excellent opportunity to work on yourself.

**Happiness** – It is appropriate to end this article with happiness. Most people view happiness as an emotion and to a degree this is accurate. However, in this context happiness is more a state of being and can be an experience that overrides all the challenges that everyone must face throughout life. Much like personal contentment, happiness is an inside job. Young people generally experience what they call being happy when something positive happens to them. They win a game, they have a fun birthday party, or they make a new friend. But the feeling of happiness is fleeting and quickly changes when the positive experience is over, and they experience a new challenge they would prefer not to face. But happiness as a state of being is not impacted by the ups and downs of daily life but takes an overview of all the positive aspects of living in a world with both great beauty and abundant ugliness. Happiness is the internal ability to control your focus toward what is right, good and positive in life. Without this mental state, the bad can easily overcome the good.

An article on the neglected basic needs of traumatized children must challenge all of us who strive to help young people who were unfortunate enough to have missed out on a childhood full of wonder and curiosity that all children deserve. As difficult as it may be, we must shoot higher than what our current system of care provides. We must not only meet the commonly considered basic needs, but also acknowledge our responsibility to provide the basic needs that we often neglect by overlooking them all together. But we cannot stop there. Basic needs are only the start of a full life and we must open the minds of troubled young people to the possibility of a full and rich life. As with everything else we attempt to teach children, the best way to show the path to a rich life filled with reaching our potential, achieving personal contentment and happiness, is by modeling this to these children by our own lives.

