

The Upside-Down World of the Traumatized Child

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This article will start and end with the main point—after what traumatized children have been through, they need and deserve that we learn to truly understand them in order to help them. Not all children who have experienced serious trauma respond in the same ways, and in fact every child and every situation is unique. However, there are some patterns that are repeated very often and are actually predictable. Most of these patterns of emotions and behaviors make little logical sense, however within the inner world of the child, they are almost automatic. What are these patterns?

Speaking in Opposites

A good place to start is one of the most common themes of young people suffering from trauma—they often verbally say the opposite of what they mean. Adults have a bad habit with children of tuning in more to the words than the meaning of the message. This is especially true with young people damaged by trauma. This is also a frequent dynamic with normal teenagers. For example, what teen has not said something like, “I wish my parents would back off and let me live my life.” However, the presence and the structure from good parents is not only necessary but quietly appreciated by most teenagers. Traumatized children take this theme to the extreme, “I hate you!” may mean “I am starting to care about you and that makes me vulnerable.” “I don’t want to be a part of this family” can often mean “I hope you will accept someone like me.” When these children say one thing and mean quite the opposite, it is the job of the adult to hear the true message or the child will go on feeling alone and anxious. It is never the fault of a child when he or she is traumatized, and the child deserves to be truly heard, and their pain and needs acknowledged. You will only be able to do this if you understand the secret code they use—consider the opposite of what is being said to help understand the true message.

Showing Caring Through Violence

As any adult who interacts with traumatized young people knows, the challenges do not end with words alone. Among the most difficult aspects of working with these children is their violent behavior. We know from understanding the brain why trauma produces reactive and violent behavior. Briefly stated, external threats are often generalized and the drive for survival creates the fight or flight response. Not all violent behavior signals the child wants you to care, but often it does mean just that. For example, abused children will seldom be violent to someone who is scary and a safety risk (a survival threat). Instead they attack someone they believe will not attack back and respond in kind. Young people often save their most violent acts for people they hope will pass this test and care for them despite their brokenness. These children often come from the position of ‘I will show you my worst and see if you will reject me, and I hope you don’t.’ For the child to act in caring ways would be like speaking their true message—nothing is more frightening to them than being vulnerable to more emotional pain. Like words, traumatized young people often act the opposite of what they truly want to communicate.

Pushing People Away in Hopes They Will Care

No healthy individual wants to be abandoned, lonely or forgotten. However, if you listen to the words and observe the behavior of traumatized children you might think that is what they really want. And if you believe this, you would usually be wrong. An important lesson was learned in the Eastern European orphanages of the last three decades--after enough serious neglect children will eventually give up. They

give up through failure to thrive, their bodies stop growing, their minds become dull and the spirit fades. The behavior of children who have given up (staring into space, rocking for hours in a crib, or no longer crying when they have a need) is quite the opposite of the angry traumatized child. In a very real way the child is communicating through emotions and behaviors 'I have not given up!' Specifically, targeting adults with distancing behavior is often a statement, "I have not given up on you so I will test to see if you care about me." Like most testing by these children, they hope you will pass the test and accept them at their worst so they know you will not reject them when you find out their flaws. It often does not feel like a compliment when a traumatized child targets you for verbal or physical abuse, but it actually can be a compliment. It often is a statement that the child finds you a safe person and would like you to care.

Creating Chaos When Stability Is the Desired Goal

To the impacted thinking patterns of traumatized children, what they need to learn to stay safe and promote survival are questions like, "Will you hurt me like other adults have?" and "Can you keep me safe when everything goes wrong?" In their mind they can't simply ask such questions, so they must create the conditions to find out the answer. This is why when the child perceives a problem, their response is to often make things worse. If there is conflict in a situation, they will escalate the struggle. These children seem to despise peace and calm, but again they often act in an opposite fashion to what they want and need. If you can handle chaos, then they know you can handle things when they are calm. Many large tantrums over small matters are often a test to see if you can help them deescalate. Many adults ask the most unhelpful question of all time, 'Why are you acting this way?' (it is unhelpful because most of the time they do not know, and if they did know they would not tell you). When you ask this question, you have signaled that you don't understand them. When chaos happens, your job is to step in and take charge and provide the safety the child needs because they have no internal confidence that they can personally resolve a difficult matter. The result of this upside/down theme looks like the child prefers and even enjoys chaos, but most of the time this is not the case. To traumatized children, survival is the first priority, and they have learned that they cannot protect themselves. Therefore, it is up to the adults to bring stability out of chaos.

Embracing Negative Feelings While Hoping for Positive Results

Psychology has learned that you can't just focus on problem behaviors with challenging children because behavior is the outgrowth of thoughts and emotions. To effectively change behavior, take two steps back and consider how the individual is thinking about or perceiving the situation. Then observe the emotions that arise from their perceptions. It makes a major difference with an acting out child at school recess to know the behavior is not just due to disappointment in being tagged out in a game; but was actually perceived as a personal threat from a larger peer. But knowing this still does not explain why many traumatized children embrace negative emotions? The answer is more complex than knowing they have had negative experiences in their short lives. Much like speaking or acting in an opposite manner to what they want, negative emotions can be a cry for help. The tears of a child while saying, "My Mom will never remember my birthday next week," are most likely an invitation to give the child some hope that this year will be more positive than previous years. Why would any individual live in a pervasive negative world? The answer for traumatized young people is the impact on emotions due to past trauma. But it can also mean the child has some hope that you can help he or she live in a more positive world than the one they know well.

Self-harm After Being Victimized by Others

To the average adult, it only makes sense that someone who has been harmed would like to avoid a repeat of the harm in the future. Perhaps to adults this makes sense, but not to most traumatized young people. There are multiple impacts of trauma that are helpful to know. Some children internalize their anger and pain and others externalize theirs. Harming oneself can only make sense if you consider the mind of the child who internalizes the pain. Particularly child who were abuse at young ages, who often do not have an understanding of abuse being an undeserved terrible act by an adult. Abuse is all some of them know, and this includes the perception that this is what living inevitably brings. Add to this how trauma imprints on the brain, and the result is after the abuser is no longer in the picture, the child continues the abuse through self-harm. In the child's perception, this is what I deserve and pain is something I know and something I have grown accustom to. For many, pain also can relieve stress they experience. Even if these children would rather not experience the pain, they might view it as inevitable, and to have some control, they hurt themselves rather than let someone else hurt them. The acting out child may often act in a way to invite more abuse. If the child believes that abuse will happen regardless, he or she might as well pick the person and the time to get it over with.

Finding Comfort in Feeling Bad

Humans are creatures of habit and traumatized children are no exception. Most of us gravitate to the known rather than the unknown regardless of whether this is the best choice. Some individuals sleep too much, others drive too fast, eat too much or exercise too little. These are often habits that are hard to break. Emotions can be habitual as well as behaviors. Some individuals frequently express positive emotions and this can be habitual, while others have the opposite emotional state of the glass perpetually half empty. Research on emotions has found that we have genetic dispositions in how we feel as well as being impacted by past experiences. For many traumatized young people, the emotional deck can be stacking against them from the start. While we have habitual behaviors, we also have habitual emotional dispositions. What some people would call a negative disposition may to the person simply be their normal state. Staying close to this normal state is actually comforting despite how it may be viewed by others. Traumatized young people can be habitually negative and for them feeling bad can be comforting, it is simply who they think they are. Of course, the sad fact is without help from the outside to know there is another choice than a negative state, emotional habits can persist throughout the lifespan. This is the goal of adults who help these children, don't just tell the child that a better future is available through positive emotions, you must model by your life that there is a more positive option that can be achieved.

Trying To Ruin Your Life in Order to Save It

Perhaps the final twist of the upside/down world of many traumatized children is putting in considerable effort to achieve negative results, or what appears as self-sabotage or trying to ruin your life. Why wouldn't everyone want good things? Who wants to live in an unhappy world of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors? Since you have read this article so far you know the answer is too many traumatized young people seem to work hard to stay unhappy. Whether it is genetics, habit, past experience, or a brain that will not move beyond trauma, it is an uphill climb for these young people. Unless the child has truly given up (serious depression or suicidal themes), the case has been made in this article that most traumatized children have not completely given up. What they communicate to others is often extreme acting out or acting in. In either case, the young person is sounding the alarm for help. By being extreme and therefore impossible to ignore, their cry for help is sincere although often disguised.

Very few traumatized young people want pain, want continued harm, or want a sad life. But too often they do not know any other path. When you observe frantic attempts to be negative, it is usually an attempt to get maximum attention signaling the individual is deeply unhappy. By now you know the child is usually wanting the opposite of what it appears on the surface.

In summary, if you are one of the people who is willing to open yourself to verbal and even physical abuse in order to help traumatized children, please consider that you cannot effectively solve a problem without first knowing what the true problem is. In the case of traumatized young people, the problem is only partially the behavior (violence, acting out, tantrums, self-harm, etc.), because behaviors are mostly symptoms coming from the brain of the child and how the individual perceives the situation and then feels about it. Once you begin to run the above patterns through your assessment of what a child you are trying to help needs, the secret code loses the complexity and becomes strikingly clear. Traumatized young people generally cannot find their way out of their habits, preconceptions and negative emotions and behavior. They need the help of caring and thoughtful adults. If you happen to be one of these adults, that makes you a true hero. Take the time to understand how each young person is unique but likely has some or all of the upside/down themes listed above. You will be more successful, as will the young people you help, if you can become an expert at understanding the true messages these children are communicating. But this is more than helping you be more successful, it is finally getting these children the help they actually want, the help they certainly need and what they truly deserve.