

TRaCS: a response to complex presentations in the kinder space

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation, a leading voice in the early years space and whose purpose is to create a safer world for children, has seen exponential growth in demand for its services working with early childhood educators to help them recognise and respond to traumatised children.

The Foundation launched its Early Years Trauma Consultancy Service (TraCS) in 2019. Primarily funded through the Victorian Department of Education School Readiness Funding, this trauma-informed, relationship-based program sees the Foundation's specialist family practitioners and trauma consultants work directly with early childhood educators in their kindergartens and childcare centres.

The TRaCS consultants also help teachers and staff to support vulnerable families with referrals and access to services, including family violence, mental health, crisis housing and material aid.

The Foundation's Head of Trauma Consulting, Lee Cameron, said the concept originated from discussions with several early childhood services in 2016.

The children they were encountering had lives characterised by high levels of disadvantage, with themes of family violence, child protection concerns, poor parental mental health, parental drug and alcohol dependency, parental isolation and refugee experiences.

"These preschool educators were seeking support in managing these complex behaviours," Lee said.

"Trauma isn't the event; it's the response to the event. It's when the children's coping mechanisms become overwhelmed. As a result of their trauma (known or suspected), many of the youngsters were emotionally dysregulated, had very poor social and communication skills and were presenting highly complex behaviours for the staff to manage. They might bite, swear, hiss or hide and cower."

In some settings this was multiple children, she said.

"One service quoted 15 of a total group of 25 of their children who had current exposure to family violence, drug and alcohol use or who had child protection involvement.

"But there are also a broader range of life events which can provoke a traumatic response, which includes family breakdown, illness and death of a loved one."

It was clear the educators were experiencing significant vicarious trauma and were at risk of burn-out.

'In the main, the educators hadn't had training specific to managing families with these levels of complexity and were at a loss in managing the behaviours and presentations of the children in their service," Lee said.

"They were quite literally being "left holding the baby" as the service system around these families failed to respond."

The Foundation came up with a solution to help.

The TraCS program philosophy is based on Trauma-Informed, Relationship-Based Practice. This is a multi-dimensional practice framework which draws upon the interconnected theories of trauma, attachment and child development and recognises that an individual and



their behaviour is best understood in the context of their experiences, relationships and environment.

“Being trauma-Informed is a core element of the framework,” Lee said.

“It focuses on the impact of trauma on the whole child and their relationships and emphasises the development and maintenance of positive, safe, nurturing relationships that foster a sense of safety, security and growth.”

TraCS consultants understand the challenges, complexities and responsibilities that come with educating and caring for children who have experienced trauma.

“We believe that the relationship between the teacher/educator and child plays a crucial role in contributing to the child’s social and emotional development and wellbeing and provides an opportunity for recovery and healing,” Lee said.

“We support and assist the educators/teachers to understand the impact of trauma on the whole child in a way that recognises the importance of relationships and use this lens to unlock strategies to support and connect with the child. Our aim is to increase the child’s experience of physical and emotional safety and to optimise opportunities for learning.”

The demand for TRaCs consultants continues to grow.

“At launch, we worked with 36 centres across Victoria; three years on, we now work with 300 centres and more than 5, 300 children.”

Breakout

Tips for working with traumatised children:

- Be curious – what has happened? What do you know of this child’s family and social history?

All behaviour is communication. What is the child telling you? Even the child who doesn’t speak?

Your most effective tool is you. Use your relationship with the child to build trust.

- Be patient and available. Children need adults who are safe and predictable and are attuned to their needs
- Children need to learn how to regulate their emotions. They can only do this if you can regulate your own.

