

ECEY5010 Portfolio

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Early trauma and its impact on behaviour in Early Years children.

1. Literature Review

Understanding Childhood Trauma and Its Impact on Behaviour

Childhood trauma encompasses a broad range of adverse experiences that can significantly affect a child's developmental trajectory. These traumatic events may be single occurrences or repeated over time (NHS Wales, 2022). Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, exposure to war or terrorism, physical assault, and all forms of child abuse or neglect. NHS Wales (2022) further emphasises that trauma in children often results from situations in which the child perceives a threat to their life, bodily integrity, or emotional safety. Importantly, trauma is not solely defined by the nature of the event itself, but by the individual child's perception and response to that event. What one child perceives as terrifying may not have the same effect on another, highlighting the subjective and developmental nature of trauma in the early years.

A similar conceptualisation of trauma is provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2024), which defines childhood traumatic stress as the psychological response to any event that causes a child to feel intensely threatened. SAMHSA notes that children aged 0 to 18 are particularly vulnerable to trauma and may struggle with ongoing feelings of insecurity, confusion, and distress following such experiences. In many cases, trauma-related responses can manifest in externalising behaviours such as aggression, or internalising responses such as withdrawal and anxiety. Moreover, traumatic experiences often disrupt normal development, particularly in the context of relational or caregiving environments where safety and predictability are paramount.

This view is also echoed by Social Care Wales (2025), which highlights that children exposed to adverse caregiving environments—including chronic neglect, physical or emotional abuse, or substance misuse in the home—are at heightened risk of developing developmental trauma. This form of trauma refers not just to isolated events but to an ongoing lack of safety, nurturing, and emotional atonement. Social Care Wales stresses that such children are deprived not only of basic physical care but also of

consistent emotional responsiveness, which can profoundly impair their ability to trust others, regulate emotions, and form healthy relationships.

Children experiencing these forms of early adversity may struggle with sensory processing, often finding it difficult to interpret and respond to stimuli in their environment. They may also exhibit difficulty with impulse control, memory, attention, and emotional regulation. These behavioural challenges are particularly evident in educational settings, where trauma-affected children may display patterns of disruptive or withdrawn behaviour that are frequently misunderstood by educators.

Attachment Disruption, Behaviour, and Welsh Policy Responses

John Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory offers a foundational lens through which to interpret the behavioural impacts of trauma in the early years. Bowlby posited that a secure attachment to a primary caregiver is essential for healthy socio-emotional development. Secure attachment enables children to develop internal working models of safety, trust, and emotional regulation. However, when this attachment is disrupted, either through abuse, neglect, loss, or prolonged separation, these working models may become distorted. Bowlby described a series of stages that children may go through in response to separation from a caregiver, such as protest, despair, and detachment. These stages, initially observed in children separated during wartime, remain highly relevant today, particularly in the context of children experiencing trauma.

Recent research has built upon Bowlby's foundational work, offering empirical validation and a deeper understanding of how early relational trauma shapes behaviour. Cicchetti and Toth (2005), for instance, demonstrated that children who have experienced maltreatment are more likely to develop disorganised attachment styles. Such attachment styles are strongly correlated with behavioural problems, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties in peer interactions. These findings lend support to Bowlby's assertion that inconsistent or harmful caregiving leads to developmental maladaptation, particularly in the realms of self-regulation and social competence. Similarly, Lieberman, Van Horn, and Ghosh Ippen (2005) found that children exposed to domestic violence exhibited increased hypervigilance, poor sleep, and mistrust of caregivers. These behavioural symptoms reflect the breakdown of the child's ability to

rely on caregivers for emotional safety, which is central to Bowlby's theory. Notably, the authors argue that trauma-exposed children often adapt in ways that are protective in unsafe environments but maladaptive in typical developmental contexts, such as school.

Neuroscience has further illuminated these findings. Perry and Szalavitz (2017) argue that chronic stress in early childhood disrupts the architecture of the developing brain, particularly the areas responsible for emotional regulation, attention, and impulse control. Exposure to trauma in this critical window of neurodevelopment can alter the child's stress-response system, leading to increased arousal, difficulty calming down, and a lowered threshold for perceiving threats. These neurological changes correspond with observed behavioural issues in children who have experienced trauma, including oppositional behaviour, anxiety, and difficulties with executive functioning.

Despite these challenges, interventions grounded in attachment theory have demonstrated significant promise. One notable example is the Attachment and Biobehavioural Catch-up (ABC) programme developed by Dozier et al. (2006). This evidence-based intervention targets caregivers of children exposed to early adversity, promoting sensitive and responsive interactions that help children regulate emotions and develop trust. The programme has been shown to reduce behavioural dysregulation, demonstrating that secure attachments can be fostered or restored even after early disruptions.

These theoretical and empirical developments are reflected in current policy frameworks within Wales. The Welsh Government (2020) has made the mitigation of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) a central priority in health and education policy. According to Public Health Wales (2015), children exposed to four or more ACEs are significantly more likely to experience behavioural difficulties, poor educational attainment, and long-term health problems. In response, Wales has adopted a national trauma-informed approach through initiatives such as the ACE Support Hub. This hub provides training and resources to professionals in education, health, and social care to help them understand trauma and respond appropriately through relationship-based practices.

Further support is embedded in the Curriculum for Wales (2022), which includes an emphasis on emotional development, resilience, and the importance of secure relationships within the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience. This policy direction signals a shift towards recognising the holistic needs of children and the central role of emotional safety in their learning. Teachers are increasingly being trained to understand behaviours not merely as signs of defiance but as potential indicators of unmet emotional needs.

Additionally, programmes such as Flying Start offer targeted support to families in disadvantaged areas, providing early education, parenting support, and health visiting with a strong focus on nurturing secure attachments. These interventions reflect Bowlby's belief in the reparative power of consistent, emotionally attuned caregiving and underscore the importance of early intervention in preventing long-term behavioural issues.

2. Methodological Considerations

This research project applies a mixed-methods approach to examine early years practitioners' perceptions of how trauma impacts children's behaviour. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative strategies, the study aims to gather in-depth personal insights as well as identify broader trends across early years settings. This dual approach aligns with Creswell's (2014) assertion that mixed methods are particularly useful for investigating complex, context-dependent events, such as childhood trauma and behavioural development.

In educational research, using mixed methods allows for a more comprehensive and refined understanding of the issue at hand (Coe et al., 2021). This approach is especially well-suited for early childhood settings where behavioural responses are varied and significantly influenced by social, emotional, and environmental factors. As Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane (2013) argue, research in early years must consider both the relational and systemic dimensions of children's development, which a single method may not adequately capture.

Chosen Methods

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with approximately 6 to 8 early years practitioners from two different settings. This sample size allows for a manageable yet diverse range of insights, aligning with recommendations for qualitative depth in small-scale studies (Walker & Solvason, 2021). The interviews will explore how practitioners identify behavioural signs of trauma, the strategies they employ in response, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of policies and training. This method was chosen for its flexibility, enabling the researcher to guide the conversation while allowing participants to express their views in their own words (Lambert, 2019).

In early childhood research, where context and relationships are paramount, interviews are particularly valuable for generating rich, detailed narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). The interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed word for word, and then analysed. Open-ended questions will help minimise researcher assumptions and allow for the disclosure of authentic perspectives from practitioners.

Online Questionnaire

To complement the qualitative data, an online questionnaire will be distributed to approximately 30 to 40 early years practitioners from various settings across Wales. This questionnaire will include both closed-ended items, such as Likert-scale questions, and a few open-ended prompts to gather additional qualitative insights. This mixed-methods approach enables data collection from a larger and more diverse sample, thereby enhancing the applicability of the findings. Questionnaires are efficient and accessible, especially for practitioners who may have limited availability (Coe et al., 2021). By including both numerical and narrative responses, we can combine statistical analysis with content exploration. The items in the questionnaire will focus on practitioners' training experiences, their perceived barriers to supporting traumatised children, and their confidence in identifying behavioural signs of trauma.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy will be used for both research methods. In qualitative research, this approach ensures that participants have relevant experience and insights related to the topic being studied (Lambert, 2019). Participants for the interviews will be selected based on their experience working with children aged 3 to 5, as well as their familiarity or training in trauma-informed practices. For the questionnaire, a broader purposive sampling strategy will be implemented to recruit practitioners from various settings, including maintained nurseries, private childcare providers, and Flying Start settings in Wales. Invitations will be distributed through early years networks and professional forums to ensure diverse representation in terms of geography, type of setting, and years of experience. While the qualitative sample will be small to facilitate in-depth engagement, the quantitative sample size will be larger, allowing for the identification of common themes and assessment of patterns across multiple settings.

Limitations for Method Selection

While mixed methods have several strengths, it is important to understand why alternative methods were not chosen for this study. Observations were excluded due to the ethical and practical challenges of observing children who might display trauma-related behaviours. Such behaviours can be influenced by context and may lead to emotional distress, raising concerns about safeguarding and obtaining consent (Harcourt et al., 2011).

Focus groups were initially considered to engage practitioners but were ultimately rejected because of the sensitive nature of the topic. Practitioners may feel reluctant to speak openly about their experiences with trauma, particularly when addressing limitations in training or support, especially in front of colleagues.

Child interviews were also dismissed due to the ethical complexities involved in discussing trauma with young children. They may lack the language skills and emotional maturity necessary for safely engaging in such conversations (Walker & Solvason, 2021).

Both methods selected for data collection present distinct limitations. Interviews can submit valuable, detailed insights, but they are vulnerable to interviewer bias, where the interviewer's own beliefs and attitudes may inadvertently influence the participant's

responses. Additionally, participants may choose to withhold negative experiences due to concerns about maintaining a positive image or fearing potential judgment from the interviewer. In contrast, while questionnaires can efficiently gather information from a larger group, they often struggle with low response rates, which may limit the diversity and richness of the data collected. Furthermore, the structured nature of questionnaires can lead to the oversimplification of complex issues, as they may not allow respondents the opportunity to express nuanced opinions or elaborate on their experiences fully.

Reflexivity, Bias, and Researcher Awareness

A key aspect of qualitative research is recognising the researcher's role in generating and interpreting data. The researcher's prior experiences, beliefs, and positionality can influence how data is collected and analysed. To address this, a reflexive journal will be maintained throughout the project to document any potential biases, unexpected reactions, or personal interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023).

The Hawthorne effect is a concern in both interviews and questionnaires, as participants may change their responses or behaviour simply because they are aware of being studied (Lambert, 2019). Similarly, the Halo effect can distort practitioners' perceptions of children's behaviour, for example, a generally well-liked child may be viewed more positively, even when exhibiting challenging behaviours (Coe et al., 2021). Being aware of these situations will guide the design of interview questions and questionnaire items. To minimise suggestion, neutral and open-ended questions will be used, and the data will be interpreted with caution, always considering the influence of social desirability.

Triangulation

To enhance the validity and reliability of the study's findings, the research will implement a methodological triangulation approach, which involves systematically comparing data obtained from two distinct sources, such as in-depth interviews and structured questionnaires. This method of triangulation is crucial as it empowers researchers to verify emerging patterns, delve into any contradictions, and ultimately

develop a more comprehensive and credible understanding of the research issue at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023).

For example, if both the qualitative data gathered from interviews and the quantitative data obtained from questionnaires reveal that a significant number of practitioners express feelings of being inadequately prepared to handle trauma-related behaviours, the alignment of these findings reinforces their reliability. On the other hand, should any inconsistencies arise between the two data sources, such discrepancies should not simply be dismissed. Instead, they present valuable opportunities for further investigation and analysis, allowing researchers to uncover deeper insights into the underlying factors contributing to these differences in responses.

To summarise, this study adopts a meticulously crafted methodological framework that effectively balances both depth and breadth of inquiry, while maintaining a strong ethical focus and a commitment to analytical thoroughness. By integrating semi-structured interviews, with their ability to capture refined, qualitative insights, alongside structured questionnaires that provide quantifiable data, the research establishes a comprehensive foundation for examining how early years practitioners perceive and manage behavioural issues stemming from trauma.

The design of this research places significant emphasis on critical components such as sampling methods to ensure representation, strategies to minimise bias, and the practice of reflexivity, which encourages researchers to remain aware of their influences on the study. Additionally, the use of triangulation enhances the validity of the findings by corroborating data from multiple sources.

Through these deliberate methodological choices, the study aims to gather rich, relevant data that is not only informative but also meticulously analysed and presented. This level of thoroughness aligns with the expectations of current early childhood research, ultimately contributing valuable insights into the complexities of addressing trauma-related behavioural challenges in young children.

3. Ethical Considerations

Research involving early years practitioners, particularly on sensitive topics such as trauma and behaviour, demands a rigorous ethical framework. Even though children are not direct participants in this study, it is essential to approach topics related to their experiences with ethical sensitivity. Ethical research safeguards the respect, safety, and autonomy of all stakeholders, including participants, researchers, and institutions. The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018, p. 4) states that ethical research in education must be grounded in values such as respect for individuals, justice, and integrity. Similarly, the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice (2022, Sections 2–4) reinforces these principles by setting expectations for informed consent, participant welfare, and responsible data management.

This section will discuss the key ethical considerations central to the research design: informed consent, the right to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality, risk mitigation, positionality and reflexivity, and data protection. Each consideration will be supported by relevant academic literature and policy frameworks.

Voluntary Informed Consent

Informed consent is crucial to ensure that participants voluntarily agree to take part in a study, fully understanding its nature, purpose, and implications. According to BERA (2018, p. 7), researchers must obtain "voluntary, informed, and ongoing consent" from participants. UWTSD (2022, Section 3.1) highlights the need to avoid coercion and misrepresentation in this process.

To facilitate informed consent, participants will receive an information sheet and consent form that detail the research topic, objectives, expected time commitment, how the data will be used, their rights (such as the right to withdraw), and contact information for both the researcher and supervisor. These documents will be written in accessible language and provided well in advance, giving participants ample time to reflect and ask questions. Walker and Solvason (2021, p. 44) emphasise that using simplified language and allowing participants time to process information promotes genuine informed consent, especially when there may be professional pressure to comply.

Right to Withdraw

The right to withdraw from a study is a fundamental principle that empowers participants and helps to mitigate power imbalances between researchers and participants. According to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines from 2018 (p. 9), it is imperative that individuals have the freedom to exit a research study or retract their data at any point, without facing any disadvantages or coercive pressures. This principle is further reinforced by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) in their 2022 guidelines (Section 3.2), which highlight the importance of clearly communicating this right to participants as an unconditional aspect of the research process.

Participants will be explicitly informed that they have the option to withdraw from interviews for a period of up to two weeks following the completion of the interview. This timeframe enables participants to reflect on their involvement and ensures they feel supported in their decision-making process. However, it is important to note that for anonymous survey data, the option to withdraw after submission may not be attainable. This limitation will be transparently communicated to participants beforehand to ensure they understand the implications of their participation.

Moreover, Harcourt, Perry, and Waller (2011, p. 71) raise a crucial point about the dynamics of participation, suggesting that researchers need to be acutely aware of the subtle pressures that adult participants might experience, even when the research does not involve children. This concern is particularly relevant within tightly knit professional communities, where the interpersonal relationships can inadvertently create feelings of obligation or discomfort. Thus, maintaining an environment where participants feel genuinely free to withdraw, without any repercussions, is essential for ethical research practices.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Preserving anonymity and confidentiality is crucial, especially when professionals discuss their experiences and opinions related to trauma and institutional support. BERA (2018, p. 8) stresses that all identifiable data must be anonymised unless explicit

consent is given. To ensure anonymity, this study will assign pseudonyms to participants, generalise identifying details, such as the names of settings and roles, and aggregate data during reporting to prevent traceability.

Confidentiality will be maintained through secure data handling practices, and researchers will be transparent about the limits to confidentiality, particularly in cases where safeguarding disclosures are necessary. This approach aligns with UWTSD's guidance (2022, Section 4.1), which states that confidentiality should be upheld unless a legal or ethical obligation necessitates a breach. As Denzin and Lincoln (2023, p. 194) highlight, confidentiality is not merely a technical requirement; it reflects a relational commitment to respecting the trust and vulnerability of participants.

Ethical Risk and Mitigation

Risk to Participants

Engaging in discussions about sensitive topics such as trauma, challenging behaviours exhibited by children, and the limitations present in systemic structures can evoke significant emotional discomfort and professional anxiety for participants. As highlighted by Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane (2013, Chapter 4, p. 62), qualitative research within the realm of early childhood education often revolves around these delicate subjects and requires researchers to be prepared for the possibility of distress among participants.

To effectively mitigate these risks and create a supportive environment for participants, the following strategies should be implemented:

- **Advance Information-** Provide comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and sensitive topics that may be discussed well before the session begins. Ensure that all participants understand their involvement is entirely voluntary, reinforcing that they have the right to choose whether to participate without any pressure.
- **Options for Engagement-** Allow participants to manage their comfort levels throughout the process. This can be achieved by offering them the flexibility to pause the conversation, skip specific questions that they find uncomfortable, or withdraw from the discussion entirely at any point without any repercussions.

This approach respects their emotional well-being and empowers them to prioritise their mental health.

- Support Services- Supply participants with detailed information about available support services, such as counselling or mental health resources, should they find themselves in need of additional assistance after discussing challenging topics. Providing this information not only reassures participants but also emphasises the importance of their emotional safety during the research process.

By implementing these strategies, researchers can create a more supportive atmosphere that acknowledges and addresses the potential risks associated with discussing sensitive issues.

Risks to the Researcher

Researchers frequently face significant emotional strain when they engage with distressing or sensitive material in their studies. To effectively manage both emotional and ethical challenges that arise from this type of research, Denzin and Lincoln (2023, p. 405) advocate for the implementation of reflexive journaling. This technique encourages researchers to document their thoughts and feelings, fostering self-reflection on their experiences. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions serve as a valuable support mechanism, allowing researchers to discuss their emotional responses and ethical dilemmas with colleagues who can offer guidance and perspective.

To further ensure the safety and well-being of researchers during potentially challenging interactions, several practical measures will be employed. These measures include establishing clear lone working protocols to minimise risks when conducting research alone, selecting public locations for interviews to enhance participant safety as well as that of the researcher, and seeking regular supervision from experienced mentors. By adopting these strategies, researchers can create a safer environment that supports their mental health while maintaining ethical standards in their work.

Institutional Considerations

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) has established strict requirements to ensure that research initiatives do not pose any reputational, legal, or ethical risks to the institution (2022, Section 5.2). To comply with these standards, researchers must obtain the necessary ethical clearance before commencing their projects, which involves a thorough review process aimed at safeguarding the rights and welfare of participants. Additionally, adherence to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is crucial, ensuring that all personal data collected during research is handled responsibly and securely. Furthermore, researchers are expected to provide clear and transparent reporting of their findings, fostering trust and accountability in the research process and maintaining the university's commitment to integrity and ethical standards.

Positionality and Power

Ethical practice involves recognising and addressing the relationships and power dynamics between researchers and participants. Researchers may feel pressured to respond in certain ways due to perceived authority or the potential for judgment. To mitigate this, researchers should:

- Adopt a non-judgmental and collaborative tone.
- Remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Ensure that data will not be shared with employers or other stakeholders.

Harcourt et al. (2011, p. 59) emphasise the need for researchers to acknowledge their influence on the data collection process and to remain reflective about power dynamics and ethics throughout the study. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2023, p. 373) advocate for 'critical reflexivity' to identify and address biases, assumptions, and the researcher's influence on participants.

Ethical Considerations Regarding Children

While children may not participate directly in this research, their experiences are significantly influenced by the way trauma and behavioural issues are communicated. Ethical guidelines established by Harcourt et al. (2011, p. 82) highlight the importance

of avoiding the 'othering' of children, essentially, the tendency to view them as separate or different from others, and caution against speaking for them in ways that simplify or distort their complex experiences.

To uphold these ethical standards, this study will implement the following principles:

- **Utilise Non-pathologizing Language-** Researchers will carefully choose words that do not label children negatively or imply that their behaviours are inherently problematic. Instead, the focus will be on understanding actions within the context of their experiences and environments.
- **Emphasise Contextual Understanding-** The research will connect trauma to behaviour in a way that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of each child's experience. This includes exploring how traumatic events can shape behaviour, highlighting that any challenging behaviours are responses to their circumstances rather than inherent flaws or shortcomings in the children themselves.
- **Avoid Sharing Identifiable Case Narratives-** To protect the privacy and dignity of the children discussed, researchers will refrain from sharing specific case studies or narratives that could lead to individual identification. This approach prioritises the ethical considerations of confidentiality and respect for the children's identities.

By adhering to these principles, researchers ensure that the research reflects a respectful and ethical representation of children's experiences, even in their absence from the research process.

Data Protection and Storage

In alignment with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Code (2022, Section 6), researchers are committed to establishing comprehensive and effective data management processes to ensure the utmost security, privacy, and legal compliance of all participant information. The following measures will be implemented:

- **Secure Digital Storage-** All digital data, including audio recordings and written transcripts from interviews or surveys, will be stored on the university's secure,

encrypted servers. These servers utilise advanced encryption technologies to protect the integrity and confidentiality of the data.

- Protected Hard Copy Materials- Any physical documents or materials generated from this research will be stored in a locked filing cabinet located in a secure area of the university. Access to this location will be restricted to authorised personnel only.
- Confidentiality Measures- Researchers will ensure that all personal identifiers, such as names and contact information, are stored separately from the data collected through interviews or surveys. This approach enhances participant confidentiality by preventing any potential linkage between their identities and the data provided.
- Data Retention Policy- Under institutional guidelines, all collected data will be retained for a period of five years. After this period, researchers will either permanently delete the digital files or securely destroy all hard copy materials to ensure that no personally identifiable information remains accessible.
- Transparent Communication with Participants- To foster trust and transparency, participants will be fully informed of these data management protocols. This information will be conveyed both in writing, through detailed consent forms, and verbally in one-on-one discussions. Researchers aim to ensure that all participants understand how their data will be handled and their rights regarding their information.

By adhering to these guidelines, researchers aim to uphold the highest standards of data protection and participant trust throughout our research activities.

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