

Targedau / Targets
Targed/Target 1 Ensure to maintain an academic tone throughout.
Targed/Target 2 Continue to develop a supported critical approach throughout, offering solutions whenever possible.
Targed/Target 3 Continue to synthesise research into your writing to aid the support of your key points.

Supporting your discussion with theory, research and practice, critically reflect on how you would support an individual learner whose progress is being affected by specific barriers to learning during one transition period (horizontal or vertical).

This assignment provides a critical evaluation of the impact of trauma on significant transitional periods in a child's life, with a particular focus on the transition to a new school. This analysis will place emphasis on how trauma has impacted a child's capacity to communicate with key adults in their lives, particularly in relation to anxiety and issues of trust. Throughout this assignment, the pseudonym 'Child E' will be used to protect her identity in accordance with BERA (2024) guidelines on confidentiality.

Child E is an 8-year-old girl who is currently in year four. She has a younger sister who is six years of age. Both children now live with their aunt and uncle as a result of significant trauma experienced whilst in the care of their biological parents. This trauma has had a deep impact on Child E, resulting in significant anxiety which has hindered her ability to trust and communicate effectively with adults. Recently, Child E and her sister moved to a new school. Child E is finding this transition challenging due to her difficulties establishing trust with new authority figures in the school, such as the teachers and teaching assistants. Following multiple conversations between the school and Child E's caregivers, it has been suggested that Child E might benefit from attending after-school well-being sessions. These sessions are led by two higher-level teaching assistants (HLTA), who have received specialised training in trauma. The wellbeing club aims to provide a safe and structured environment where Child E can have emotional support and build trusting relationships with the HLTA. The staff across the school will also have additional trauma training to support Child E. This next part of the assignment will examine Child E's barriers to learning.

Trauma Informed Care Implementation Resource Center (2024) defines trauma as an exposure to a sequence of events or an incident that can be emotionally disturbing and that has prolonged effects on a person's spiritual, social, physical, emotional, or mental well-being. Whilst Child E was in the care of her parents, both her and her sister experienced trauma in the form of neglect. NSPCC Learning (2024) describes neglect as a child's basic psychological and physical needs not being met. They state that this can have long-lasting impacts on a child's life and this is evident with Child E.

Ryan, Stiller and Lynch (1994) suggest that children who feel secure and supported by their parents and teachers are more likely to internalise positive behaviours relating to school, such as following school rules and participating in class. This suggests that because Child E does not have a secure relationship with her parents, because of the neglect, she might not feel motivated to engage in behaviours that promote academic success, for example completing work. This is because without a sense of trust or emotional connection with caregivers, children might have difficulty developing self-worth (Doyle and Cicchetti, 2017).

The neglect that Child E experienced, has affected her communication skills as she finds it difficult to trust new adults and suffers from social anxiety. Research (Sharp and Fonagy, 2008) suggests that early interactions with caregivers form the basis of expectancies of other people's trustworthiness. If a child has experienced neglect or maltreatment, links can be seen with resistance to trusting unfamiliar people (Gobin and Freyd, 2013). This lack of trust can result in significant anxiety when communicating and interacting with others, especially figures of authority such as teachers, who may remind the child of untrustworthy caregivers. (NCTSN, 2024). This lack of trust has caused Child E to not feel confident to ask the teacher for help or guidance on work, therefore affecting her schoolwork.

Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) suggest that children who have been neglected have a more negative outlook on their social world with having difficulty solving problems in relationships. They also state that they may be avoidant in their interactions with peers and may have fewer friends than other children. Child E's selective interactions with peers are an example of how her past experiences have impacted her social and emotional development, however, she has formed a connection with one of her new classmates.

To better understand the basis of Child E's behaviours, the assignment will move onto analysing theories about trauma. Bruce Perry (2009) is one of many researchers of the 'Trauma theory'. Perry (2009) describes development as a complex process that involves billions of interactions, and he believes that maltreatment such as trauma and neglect can influence the developing brain. It is these adverse experiences that disrupt normal neurodevelopment by causing atypical patterns of brain activity. This suggests that when Child E experienced neglect at the hands of her parents, the development of her brain was disrupted. Perry (2009) moves on to suggest that when an individual's stress response is repeatedly activated by prolonged threats, the brain undergoes changes that alter the structure and chemistry of the neural networks inside the brain involving stress. This process ultimately resets the brain to operate as if they are under constant threat.

Lyons *et al.* (2020) agree with this too and state that even when a traumatised child is in a safe environment, their survival responses do not turn off. If their brain is in continuous survival mode, there is no room for new information to be taken in. Child E is possibly in a constant state of feeling threatened, which might hinder her ability to learn and develop. While many researchers and theorists agree that trauma has significant impacts on an individual's brain, some researchers such as Richard Davidson, feel that these effects aren't permanent and can be altered through interventions (Davidson and McEwen, 2012). A key strength of Perry's work on trauma theory is its foundation in scientific research, which

enhances its reliability and credibility (Prasad, 2011). However, this theory has a significant emphasis on neurodevelopment, which can make it challenging for individuals to understand and therefore implement.

When a child is neglected by their caregivers, classical conditioning can explain why certain environments, emotional experiences or interactions can trigger distress in a child. Classical conditioning was developed by Ivan Pavlov, a Russian psychologist (Simply Psychology, 2024). The theory is that when two stimuli are linked together, it produces a new learned response in a person. If a child has been brought up in a neglectful environment, attempts to communicate are often met with negative reactions.

In Child E's case, her attempts to communicate (neutral stimuli) may be met with rejection (unconditioned stimulus). This will lead to feelings of sadness or helplessness, which is the conditioned response (VanElzakker *et al.*, 2013). Once the communication is associated with negative feelings, the child may generalise the conditioned response with other environments and avoid communication. This can be identified with Child E in school as she fears not having her needs met or being rejected by the teachers in her new school, so she avoids communicating with them. This means she avoids asking for help, showing the teacher her finished work and asking for the bathroom.

Pavlov's classical conditioning theory presents both strengths and limitations. Unlike Bruce Perry's theory, Pavlov's theory lacks clarity about cognitive processes (Simply Psychology, 2024). It does not take into consideration mental processes involved in learning, such as interpreting or understanding situations, which limits its application to the more complex human behaviours. However, Viona, Mykola and Ilona, (2023) state that the concept of classical conditioning has been applied in many fields, including healthcare and psychology, which demonstrates the theory's versatility. Pavlov's theory helps explain how certain behaviours are learned, suggesting that major transitions in a child's life may trigger conditioned responses due to feelings of uncertainty.

The transition that Child E has recently gone through is moving schools, which is considered a vertical transition. A vertical transition is linked to specific events that do not occur regularly, such as starting nursery or moving from primary to secondary school (National Day Nurseries Association, 2020). Moving to a new school involves learning to adapt to new environments, build relationships with unfamiliar peers and teachers and learn new routines. Academically, the child may need to adapt to new teaching styles and changes in the curriculum which can be a challenge (UNIS Hanoi, n.d). For a child to successfully adjust, the child needs to be resilient, have well-developed social skills and most importantly, have

significant support from family and the school to make the transition as smooth as possible (Family Lives, 2024).

Child E who has faced neglect and has trust and communication difficulties, finds this transition challenging. First of all, building a relationship with new teachers and staff can be difficult due to her wariness of authority figures. This hesitation can hinder Child E's ability to seek help or ask questions (Child Mind Institute, 2024). When a new child starts in a classroom, the teacher will try and build a relationship with them and get to know their interests, but this will be difficult as Child E is reluctant to trust her teacher and therefore share information about herself. Another challenge Child E faces has been forming friendships because of her limited communication skills. Pfaltz *et al.* (2022) state that early experiences of neglect can have effects on social functioning development. Neglected children show more withdrawal in social situations and have lower peer acceptance. This will affect how Child E will behave around her peers and if she is socially withdrawn, her new peers are less likely to want to engage with her.

The following section of this assignment will examine the support strategies implemented to aid Child E's development, alongside a critical analysis of the chosen strategies. In order to address the developmental needs that were impacted by trauma, the school has introduced specific strategies aimed at building Child E's confidence, resilience and communication skills. These objectives align closely with the Four Purposes of the Welsh curriculum, particularly the aim of developing 'healthy, confident individuals' (Welsh Government, 2022 a). The main strategy the school has implemented is an after-school well-being group.

The well-being group is designed as a safe, supportive environment where children can develop their social and emotional skills without the added pressure of the formal classroom setting. The group is run by two higher-level teaching assistants (HLTA) who both have had training in trauma. Some of the activities that the children take part in are feelings check-ins, emotions games, role-playing scenarios and turn-taking games. These activities are based on building trust and developing social skills.

The concept of well-being groups is based on the principles of Vygotsky's theory of learning. Barnett (2019) describes how in Vygotsky's theory, he discusses the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the gap between what children can accomplish on their own and what they can achieve with collaboration and support. The well-being group therefore acts as Child E's ZPD as she will engage in activities that challenge her current social capabilities, but it is made achievable with the right guidance from the HLTA.

There are both strengths and limitations to the implementation of the well-being group as a strategy. One of the many strengths is that the group provides consistency and structure. By having this group at the same time every day, Child E knows what to expect and what staff are going to be there, which establishes a sense of security and predictability. Arvidson *et al.* (2011) describe how children who have experienced trauma may have lived in unpredictable environments which has altered their perception of the world. By implementing a predictable structure in the well-being group, it will provide Child E with a chance to restore her sense of safety.

Another strength of the well-being group is its ability to build Child E's resilience. The group's activities, such as role play and guided discussions, are designed to build emotional resilience and coping strategies, which are crucial for overcoming adverse past experiences (Banerjee, 2016). Some of the other strengths are the development of positive relationships with staff and peers in her group and building her confidence in communicating via effective role modelling. Starting at a new school can be challenging as there will be new peers and new staff, but by attending this group, Child E will have the opportunity to develop relationships with peers from across the school who she may work with in class or play with on the playground.

One of the limitations of this group is the need for some relaxation time for both the children and the staff after school. It is run every day after school which means the staff and children are in school for an extra hour every day, which interferes with their need to rest.

Wellbeing.org (2017) states that children need time to relax and decompress in an unstructured way to relieve stress and anxiety. Whilst it is important for Child E to develop her social skills in a group context, she may also become over-reliant on her peers or the HLTA's and struggle to develop the skills to think or entertain herself (Cerino, 2021). A way that the group could overcome this, is to factor in some time in the sessions for independent play or tasks.

Another strategy the school have put in place is that the staff have additional trauma training. Implementing a trauma-informed approach across the school aims to create an environment where staff are aware of the impacts of trauma on learning and behaviour (Overstreet, 2016). Understanding how trauma has affected Child E is fundamental to being able to support her and tailor practice to suit her needs. This approach aligns with the curriculum for Wales which emphasises inclusion and equity when considering the needs of each child (Welsh Government, 2016). Upon gaining a thorough understanding of Child E's specific learning needs, the teacher can initiate the development of a supportive relationship, thereby supporting Child E through the transition.

Despite the many strengths of the implementation of this training, there are some limitations. Time may be an issue as the staff need time out of teaching to have the additional training. This also might cause upset with Child E who would have slowly started to develop trust with her class teacher and having a supply teacher cover the classroom might be upsetting for her. However, as Estyn (2013) has stated, many schools employ HLTA's who can cover the class when the teacher is absent, which is fortunately the case in Child E's school, as Child E is already familiar with them. Overall, both the well-being group and the additional training on trauma could be effective strategies to support Child E's development. Both of these strategies were implemented following multiple conversations with the stakeholders in Child E's life.

The Welsh Government (2022 b) states that schools should involve stakeholders in a child's education including learners, carers, and external agencies. They argue that this is important to ensure the curriculum meets the needs of the learners. Welsh Government (2022 b) also describe how communicating effectively with carers and guardians on an ongoing basis is key to developing positive relationships. If this collaboration amongst the stakeholders is implemented effectively, it can help progress the learner by both the parents or carers and the school staff sharing how the child can be supported both outside and within the school environment.

Urie Bronfenbrenner is a psychologist who developed the Ecological systems theory. This theory offers valuable insight into why collaboration amongst stakeholders is critical when supporting a child in school, especially if they have additional needs due to neglect or communication difficulties (Sadownik, 2023). According to Bronfenbrenner when carers, school staff and other stakeholders collaborate, they create a consistent support system (Sadownik, 2023). For Child E, who has experienced neglect, having consistent expectations, language and responses at home and in school, builds a sense of predictability which is essential for her well-being.

In conclusion, this assignment has explored how Child E's new school has implemented strategies to support her in overcoming barriers resulting from past neglect. As previously discussed, Pavlov's classical conditioning theory (VanElzakker *et al.*, 2013) helps explain how Child E has learned to expect rejection when seeking help. This may account for her reluctance to approach her new teacher for support or guidance, which can therefore hinder her learning as time goes on as she won't be seeking support when she is struggling with the lesson content. To address this the school has introduced a well-being group after school

which is run by two HLTA's and some of her peers across the school also are in attendance. The aim of these sessions is to develop Child E's trust with authority figures and develop social communication skills, through a range of activities.

For the learner, the way forward involves a gradual development of trust and communication with the staff in her school through supportive interactions with the adults, who would have had additional training on trauma and the specific needs of Child E. The staff in the school will need ongoing professional development to be able to support Child E through this major transition. Open communication needs to take place between the school staff and other stakeholders in Child E's life, such as her aunt and uncle, educational psychologists and any external agencies.

Reflecting on my learning from this assignment, I am more aware of the importance of being trauma-informed in my practice and responding to my learners with consistency and compassion. This new knowledge enhances my ability to meet the QTS standards and in particular involving partners in learning as I have learnt about the importance of positive involvement of family and other stakeholders (Welsh Government, 2019). Literature shows that teaching in a trauma-informed way improves educational outcomes, which affirms the value of these strategies in prompting vulnerable children's well-being and academic growth (Maynard, 2017).

Appendix

One page profile

One page profile



This is Child E. She is 8 years old, and she is a year 4 pupil. She has 1 sibling who also attends the same school, and they are in year 2.

Child E and her sibling's experienced some trauma in the form of neglect. She has since lived with other family members, who she values greatly. As a result of the trauma, Child E struggles with anxiety and finds it hard to trust adults in her life. She recently moved schools and is finding it difficult to build trusting relationships with teachers and other members of staff.

As a result of Child E and her sister experiencing trauma and going through a large change in their family, the school have had additional training so that they can become trauma informed teachers. The school have also set up a wellbeing club afternoon which both Child E and her sister attend, alongside other children who need it. The club is run after school every day, by 2 HLTA's who have had the trauma training.

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