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Literature Review

How effective are childhood trauma informed interventions in improving behaviour outcomes in children under 5?

Childhood trauma, including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), has been widely recognized as a significant factor influencing behavioural, emotional and cognitive development. Early childhood is a critical period for intervention, as trauma can disrupt attachment, emotional regulation and social interactions, leading to long-term behavioural challenges (Smith and Pollack, 2020).

This research aims to explore the effectiveness of early childhood trauma-informed interventions in improving behaviour among children under the age of five. Early childhood experiences play a pivotal role in shaping children's emotional and behavioural development and exposure to trauma such as, neglect, abuse, or adverse life events during these formative years can lead to long-term cognitive, emotional and social challenges. Trauma-informed interventions have been increasingly adopted in early years settings to mitigate these impacts by creating supportive environments that promote safety, trust and healing. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study will combine semi-structured interviews and observational techniques to gather in-depth qualitative and contextual data. The sample will include children under five who have experienced trauma, as well as early years professionals, carers and parents involved in their care. Through semi-structured interviews, the research will capture the lived experiences and perspectives of adults who support these children, while observational data will provide direct insight into behavioural changes and social interactions in naturalistic settings. By examining trauma-informed interventions and drawing on existing literature, this study aims to assess how such practices influence emotional regulation, social engagement, resilience and overall behavioural outcomes, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of effective early intervention strategies.

Since the mid-20th century, research has helped us better understand psychological and emotional trauma and its effects on mental health, behaviour and society. Despite knowing that trauma is common among people who commit crimes, it has not always been considered in sentencing or rehabilitation. However, efforts to include trauma-informed approaches in policies and practices are now increasing (McCartan, 2020).

Pickens & Tschopp (2017) defines trauma as any event that a person experiences as harmful, either physically or emotionally, when they feel their own life or the life of someone they love is in danger. It can result from various situations, including violence, abuse, neglect, natural disasters, severe illness, loss of a loved one. Understanding the impact of trauma is essential in supporting individuals affected by these experiences.

Trauma-informed interventions aim to create supportive environments that foster resilience and mitigate the negative effects of trauma on children's behaviour. Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (2022) state Trauma-informed practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development. NAPAC (2025) supports this by saying Trauma-informed practice is a framework that acknowledges how exposure to trauma can affect a person's brain function, biological responses, psychological health and social development. Consequently, it is essential for organisations to implement training and procedures that enable staff to be responsive to the needs of trauma survivors while preventing situations that could be distressing or re-traumatising.

Kelly *et al.* (2023) studies indicate that adopting a trauma-informed approach, supported by organisational change strategies, can help reduce coercive practices among staff working with young people who exhibit challenging behaviours. Evidence suggests that these interventions may lead to a decline in restrictive practices. However, further rigorous research using implementation science is needed to better understand their effectiveness in reducing seclusion, restraint and coercion in child and adolescent care settings. Emphasizing a humanistic approach such as Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) could significantly improve both service users' experiences and staff well-being in care environments.

According to Han *et al.* (2021), while trauma-informed interventions were largely delivered in outpatient settings by medical professionals, their effectiveness in improving psychological outcomes was inconsistent. Some studies showed significant reductions in PTSD, depression and anxiety, but others found mixed results. Han *et al.* (2021) continues to say the review highlights the need for future research to expand trauma-informed interventions to address broader trauma types, such as racism and discrimination, and to examine a wider range of trauma-related outcomes. Additionally, the role of trained laypersons in delivering these interventions should be explored further. Although NHS England (2025) states that growing evidence shows a strong link

between trauma and mental health, with concerns that the current system may retraumatise survivors, while trauma-informed approaches are proving beneficial for both staff and survivors.

NHS England (2025) states that trauma-informed practice is based on six key principles: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration. These principles help create supportive environments that acknowledge and respond to the impact of trauma.

Nurture and trauma-informed approaches can significantly improve educational outcomes by enhancing students' social and emotional competence, confidence and overall attainment. Education Scotland (2025) emphasizes that these approaches focus on wellbeing and relationships, supporting the growth and development of children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who require additional targeted support to close the equity gap. By fostering a nurturing environment, trauma-informed practices help create inclusive and supportive learning spaces that promote resilience and long-term success.

Studying trauma-informed approaches in schools comes with many challenges, just like other complex school-based models. However, researching these approaches can be highly beneficial. Watson and Astor (2025) highlight that trauma-informed schools aim to create safe, supportive environments that address the impact of trauma on students and staff. Their review emphasizes the importance of integrating trauma-informed principles into school policies and practices to improve emotional, behavioural and cognitive outcomes for children, families and educators. If implemented effectively, these approaches could lead to more resilient school communities and better long-term student well-being.

Han *et al.* (2021) systematically review trauma-informed interventions, highlighting their effectiveness in reducing PTSD, depression and anxiety, while noting inconsistent evidence overall. They argue for expanding interventions to address broader trauma types such as racism and discrimination. In contrast, Smith and Monteux (2023) critically examine trauma-informed approaches in social work and social care, questioning their value beyond standard social care practices and critiquing their limited evidence base. While both discuss trauma-informed care, Han *et al.* (2021) emphasize intervention efficacy, whereas Smith and Monteux (2023) challenge its practical application.

This research aims to emphasize the increasing awareness of childhood trauma as a key influence on emotional, behavioural and cognitive growth. While trauma-informed interventions show potential, the existing research is inconsistent, requiring further investigation to enhance their effectiveness and determine long-term outcomes.

Integrating trauma-informed approaches into schools and care settings may foster safer and more supportive environments, benefiting both students and staff.

Methodology

According to University of Newcastle Library (2024) research methods refer to the systematic approaches, techniques or processes used to gather and analyse data. These methods help researchers discover new insights or enhance their understanding of a subject. University of Newcastle Library (2024) continue to say qualitative research explores personal experiences and emotions using methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis to gather insights, whereas quantitative research focuses on numbers and patterns, using surveys, observations, document screening and experiments to test theories and measure results. Both methods provide valuable perspectives, with qualitative research diving deep into meaning and quantitative research ensuring accuracy with data.

Hassan(2024a) supports this by stating research methods are structured approaches used in a study to address research questions or examine hypotheses. It outlines the tools, techniques and processes for gathering and analysing data, ensuring the research follows a systematic and reproducible framework. They continue to say the importance of research methodology lies in its ability to provide clarity and focus, ensuring a study aligns with its research objectives. A well-defined methodology enhances reliability, allowing results to be replicated and trusted, while also ensuring validity by confirming that the chosen methods are appropriate for addressing the research questions. Transparency is another crucial aspect, as it enables others to assess the credibility and rigor of a study. Additionally, adaptability within the methodology allows researchers to make necessary adjustments when faced with unforeseen challenges.

To explore how effective trauma-informed interventions are in improving behavioural outcomes in children under five, a carefully selected methodological approach is essential. Combining semi-structured interviews with observations allows researchers to examine both practitioner perspectives and observe children's behaviours. These two qualitative methods complement each other, offering depth and context to the evaluation of trauma-informed practices in early years settings.

Ruslin *et al.* (2022) believe that qualitative researchers often favour semi-structured interviews over structured and unstructured ones for two main reasons. First, they allow for deeper exploration and richer insights, which structured interviews often limit. Second, they offer flexibility while maintaining direction unlike unstructured interviews which can lack focus, semi-structured formats provide a guiding framework that still allows researchers to adapt questions and discussions as needed.

According to the CLRN team (2024), qualitative observational studies collect non-numerical data such as text, images or videos to explore complex concepts and identify patterns. They offer deeper insight into behaviours and phenomena by observing natural interactions without intervention.

Triangulation, as defined by Hassan (2024b), involves using multiple research methods, data sources, theories, or investigators to explore the same research question. This approach enhances credibility, validity and reliability by reducing reliance on a single method and confirming data consistency. It also allows for deeper, more nuanced insights. However, Hassan (2024b) notes that triangulation can be resource-intensive and complex, with potential challenges in interpreting conflicting results across methods.

Using both interviews and observations enhances the study through triangulation a process that increases credibility by cross-verifying data collected through different methods. Carter *et al.* (2014) emphasise that triangulation not only helps confirm findings but also highlights discrepancies that may reveal deeper insights. For instance, if a practitioner reports that a child's anxiety has decreased however observations show ongoing distress, this gap prompts further exploration and strengthens the interpretation of data.

Chosen Sample

For this research the chosen sample consists of 15 children under the age of five who have experienced trauma and are currently receiving targeted interventions across three nurseries. Also, early years practitioners who work in these settings, parents and carers will be involved. This includes 5 children from each setting. The sample was selected to provide a holistic view of how trauma-informed practices are implemented and their relative impact across different environments where young children spend significant time. Alongside the children, approximately 14 adults will participate in the study, comprising of 3 early years practitioners, 15 parents/ carers, with the potential inclusion of 1–2 early years managers or ALNCO's to offer broader contextual insights. Including early years practitioners allows for the evaluation of structured, professional approaches within educational settings, while perspectives from parents and carers provide a deeper understanding of how interventions are delivered and maintained in home environments. By examining these three settings, the study aims to assess the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions in both formal and informal caregiving contexts and to identify which support factors most contribute to positive behavioural outcomes in young children who have experienced trauma.

The sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling also referred to as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability method in which participants are deliberately chosen based on characteristics that align with the

research objectives, unlike random sampling, which aims to reduce bias through broad representation, purposive sampling targets specific groups or individuals to gain deeper insights (Bullard, 2024). According to Bullard (2024), this technique is widely used across disciplines such as healthcare, social science and marketing, where focused data collection is critical. While this approach offers rich, detailed data, Bullard (2024) claims that it may introduce bias and limit the generalizability of findings, requiring careful consideration in study design and interpretation.

Stratton (2024) supports Bullard by stating purposeful sampling is a qualitative research method where participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the study. It is efficient, widely used in fields for example, healthcare and social sciences, and useful for gaining insights into targeted issues. While it offers several advantages, it must be carefully designed to avoid bias and misinterpretation, and should focus on a single, well-defined research objective to ensure validity.

Chosen Methods

According to Magaldi and Berler (2020) semi-structured interviews are a flexible research method commonly used in the social sciences and clinical settings to collect qualitative data. It is guided by a predetermined framework that ensures a structured focus on a core topic, while still allowing room for exploration. Magaldi and Berler (2020) continue to explain that this approach enables researchers to adapt the conversation as it progresses, following emerging themes and insights that arise naturally.

Adeoye-Olatunde *et al.* (2021) state that while various methods exist for collecting qualitative data, semi-structured interviews stand out for their ability to maintain focus while allowing investigators the flexibility to explore relevant topics that emerge during the conversation. opportunity for insightful discussions.

Kakilla (2021) believes that a semi-structured interview is a key tool in qualitative research. They are valued for their ability to foster deep discussions, flexibility and idea generation. They allow insights to be captured naturally, including non-verbal communication. However, they do have challenges, such as potential data loss when relying on technology, language barriers leading to misinterpretation and inadequate responses affecting understanding. Kakilla (2021) continues that they can also be time-consuming, especially for high-profile individuals, and are not ideal for group settings due to the need for active listening.

Although there are many pros to these methods, there are somethings that could influence the research. The 'Halo effect' could be one of them. According to Lasky (2024), the 'Halo effect' is when we judge someone or something based on our overall impression, rather than evaluating each trait separately. Lasky (2024) believes that the Halo effect happens in many areas, for example schools and workplaces, where a

teacher or employer might let one good or bad trait affect their judgment of a person's overall abilities.

In combination with interviews, observations allow researchers to witness behaviours as they unfold in real time, offering an objective lens through which to assess trauma-informed practices. This method involves observing children in naturalistic settings such as during play or classroom routines without interference from the researcher.

Observational research involves studying participants in their natural settings to gather authentic data on behaviours and interactions. However, one challenge often encountered is the Hawthorne effect, where individuals alter their behaviour because they know they are being observed. This can compromise the validity of findings, as the behaviours recorded may not reflect typical actions (Investopedia, 2023).

According to Kumar (2023) observation is the oldest investigative method used by both natural and social scientists. However, while it helps in studying external behaviours, it cannot provide insight into an individual's perceptions, beliefs or emotions.

Observation is a valuable method for studying behaviour as it naturally occurs, especially in situations where individuals struggle to express themselves, such as children, tribal communities or animals. It allows researchers to analyse complete events for deeper insights. However, it has limitations as quantifying data can be difficult, some groups are hard to access, and specific events may take time to observe. Additionally, it is time-consuming, costly, lacks control measures and is challenging in large social settings. Private behaviours and internal attitudes remain difficult to study, and observer bias can affect data collection (IGNOU 2017).

In summary, combining semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations provides a robust framework for evaluating the impact of trauma-informed interventions on young children's behaviour. Interviews capture the subjective, professional insights of those working directly with affected children, while observations provide concrete evidence of behavioural change. When integrated, these methods offer a fuller picture of both perceived and actual outcomes, reinforcing the reliability of the research and enriching our understanding of effective early interventions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are a fundamental aspect of conducting responsible research and will be carefully addressed throughout this study to ensure the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process.

UKRI (2025) believe that researchers should plan and carry out their studies in line with established ethical principles and recognized best practices, ensuring that their work is reviewed and monitored by the appropriate professional and institutional bodies. It is

essential that both researchers and research organizations adhere to all applicable legal regulations. UKRI (2025) continue to say Ethical research is a shared responsibility involving researchers, research institutions and ethics committees. Rather than viewing ethics as a mere hurdle or checklist, the focus should be on thoughtful and collaborative engagement, fostering mutual understanding and responsible decision-making to enhance positive outcomes and reduce potential harm.

BERA (2024) emphasizes that educational researchers must uphold an ethical standard of respect for all individuals involved in or affected by their research, including themselves. This includes fairness, sensitivity and dignity, while recognizing various characteristics such as age, gender, sexuality, race and many others. Researchers should also be mindful of structural inequalities including socio-economic status, parental status and neurodiversity that shape social relationships in research. Special attention should be given to vulnerable individuals, ensuring sensitivity at all stages, including reporting and publication (BERA, 2024).

It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that General Data Protection Regulations and the Data Protection Act (2018) are adhered to while carrying out any research. Data protection legislation regulates how organisations, including businesses and government departments use personal information. In the UK, data protection is governed by the UK General Data Protection Regulation, anyone handling personal data must adhere to strict rules known as 'data protection principles' unless an exemption applies (GOV.UK, n.d.a).

According to GOV.UK (n.d.a), personal data must be processed fairly, lawfully and transparently, used for specified purposes and kept accurate and up to date. Data should be relevant, limited, securely stored and retained only as needed. Stronger legal protections apply to sensitive information such as race, ethnicity, political opinions and religious beliefs, with separate safeguards for criminal conviction data.

Consent and informed consent are fundamental ethical principles in research, ensuring that participants voluntarily agree to take part with full understanding of the study's purpose, risks and procedures. Informed consent requires researchers to provide clear, accessible information, considering factors such as age and cognitive ability to ensure comprehension, particularly for vulnerable groups for example, children or individuals with disabilities (UKRI, 2024). Participants must be aware of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences, reinforcing autonomy and ethical integrity in research (University of Oxford, 2021). Proper consent procedures uphold transparency, protect participants' rights and enhance the credibility of research findings (GOV.UK, 2018).

According to Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (2015) ethical research with young children is advancing rapidly, emphasizing their meaningful participation in the informed consent process. This article builds on children's rights and informed consent literature to propose a new conceptual model, introducing an interactive narrative approach.

Designed for children aged three to eight, this method uses storybooks with research-related images in interactive storytelling to enhance understanding and engagement. Its holistic design ensures that informed consent is both accessible and meaningful for young research participants.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 13) affirms that children have the right to freely express themselves, including seeking, receiving and sharing information through various forms of communication. This underscores the importance of providing children with accessible ways to share their perspectives on issues that affect them, ensuring meaningful participation in research and decision-making processes (Department of Education, n.d.).

According to Posodobitev (2025), Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation illustrates eight levels of involvement, ranging from manipulation where children have no agency, to child-initiated shared decision-making with adults, where they actively shape outcomes. The lower rungs (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) reflect nonparticipation, while the higher rungs emphasize ethical engagement ensuring children contribute meaningfully to decisions. Ethical research should align with rung 4 or above where children understand their role and can provide informed feedback. This approach fosters genuine participation, allowing researchers to incorporate children's perspectives into service design and policy development.

A Participant Information Sheet provides essential details about a research project, ensuring transparency and informed consent. Its purpose is to help them decide whether to take part by offering relevant information (UWE Bristol, 2019).

According to UWE Bristol (2019) information sheets should include a title and relevant logos, the name and contact details of researchers and funders and ethical approval information. The sheet outlines voluntary participation, the process for withdrawing and a summary of risks and benefits. It also should explain how participant data will be handled, where research findings will be published and includes contact information for queries or complaints. Finally, it includes a privacy notice and a thank you message to acknowledge participants' contributions.

UCL (n.d.) supports this by stating a Participant Information Sheet should provide a clear summary of the research project, its aims and the entire research process in accessible language. It should explain what participation entails, including duration, location and activities involved. Different versions may be needed for various participant groups or types of involvement. Key details include voluntary participation, withdrawal options, inclusion criteria, potential risks and benefits and measures to ensure privacy and confidentiality. This ensures participants fully understand their role in the study before deciding to take part.

Ensuring the privacy and anonymity of research participants is crucial to protecting them from potential social, economic or psychological harm. To maintain ethical standards and safeguard participants, advanced procedures must be implemented for reliable data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity are essential ethical principles in research that support informed consent, ensuring participants' personal data remains private and protected (Kang and Hwang, 2023).

Maintaining participants' confidentiality and anonymity in research is crucial to protecting their privacy and preventing unauthorized access to personal data. Researchers must implement safeguards at every stage, from recruitment to data disposal, using physical, administrative, technical and research design measures to minimize risks (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2017). These strategies include secure data storage, restricted access, encryption and anonymization of sensitive information. Additionally, researchers must consider legal and ethical obligations, ensuring transparency about potential risks while upholding participants' autonomy and rights throughout the study (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2017).

According to the University of Oregon (n.d.), research carries various risks for participants, researchers and institutions, requiring careful ethical and procedural safeguards. Participants may face psychological, social, economic or legal risks, such as distress, loss of privacy or unintended consequences from disclosed information. University of Sunderland (n.d.) supports this by stating that researchers, particularly those working with sensitive topics, may encounter personal safety risks, reputational harm or legal challenges. Universities also face institutional risks, including ethical breaches, legal liabilities and reputational damage if research is improperly conducted (University of Essex, n.d.)

To mitigate these risks, institutions implement risk assessments, ethical review processes and participant protection measures, ensuring informed consent, data security and researcher safety protocols (University College Dublin, 2021). UWTSD (n.d) follow the Trusted Research and Innovation principles to ensure ethical international research collaborations. The policy emphasizes risk awareness, due diligence and mitigation strategies to protect intellectual property, sensitive research and personal data. Researchers must assess partner stability, identify risks and apply proportionate safeguards before proceeding with collaborations. Key considerations include legal frameworks, ethical values, conflicts of interest, data security and funding transparency. UWTSD enforces research ethics, data governance and export control policies to comply with national security regulations while maintaining academic integrity and innovation. Monitoring and ongoing due diligence ensures research is conducted responsibly and in line with UKRI standards (UWTSD, n.d.).

Data from semi-structured interviews and observations should be collected systematically to ensure accuracy and ethical integrity. Interviews can be audio-

recorded or transcribed, while observations may involve detailed field notes or video recordings to capture behaviours and interactions (UCL, n.d.). To protect confidentiality, data should be anonymized, securely stored in encrypted databases and access restricted to authorized researchers (ICO, n.d.). When research is conducted based on consent as required by the GDPR, it is important to differentiate this consent for processing personal data from other types of consent that function as ethical guidelines or procedural requirements.

To adhere to the above and to ensure the GDPR and data protection ACT 2018 are not breached, all interviews and observations will be stored securely on an encrypted database with password access, there will be restricted access to these files.

Citizens Information (2023) state that children have the same data protection rights as adults, including the ability to request access to their personal data. However, they receive additional safeguards, as they may be less aware of the risks and consequences of sharing their information or the protections available to them. Parents or guardians can also make access requests on behalf of their children; however data controllers must assess the child's age, capacity and best interests before responding to ensure their privacy and rights are protected (Citizens Information, 2023).

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 establish strict guidelines for handling personal data in research, ensuring compliance with ethical and legal standards. GDPR applies to all identifiable personal data, requiring informed consent, transparency and security measures to protect participants (ICO, n.d.). The DPA 2018 complements GDPR by providing specific exemptions for research, allowing data to be retained indefinitely for scientific, historical or statistical purposes, provided safeguards are in place (University of Bristol, n.d.). Researchers must ensure data minimization, anonymization and secure storage to mitigate risks while maintaining integrity in research practices (GOV.UK, n.d.b).

Furthermore, researchers must conduct data protection impact assessments (DPIAs) when handling sensitive data to identify potential risks and implement necessary controls. Ethical oversight committees ensure research remains compliant with data protection laws, preventing misuse and unauthorized access to participant information (IAPP, 2019). These regulations emphasize the balance between innovation and privacy, ensuring ethical standards are maintained throughout the research process.

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