

The Bereavement Buddy

Connecting and linking the community with NSW NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief

Issue 1, June 2010



When Abuse Derails Learning

SANDY Jeffs was eight when she first saw her father beating her mother.

By Denise Ryan, May 7, 2010 - The Age

"My mother had been at Uncle Charlie's pub. I'd watched my father pacing around the house waiting for her. There was an awful sinister feeling about him."

Such nights became regular events. "The violence in our family life went on until my father's death almost 30 years later," she says.

Ms Jeffs is best known as a poet, writer and community educator, who offers rare insight into her continuing struggle with schizophrenia. After writing about her

childhood in her latest book, *Flying with Paper Wings, Reflections on Living with Madness*, she found herself wondering what might have happened if her depression related to the abuse and her mother's alcoholism had been treated in senior high school.

"If I had had some sort of intervention, would I have gone on to full-blown mental illness?" This might sound unlikely, but the latest findings in neuroscience would seem to confirm her hunch. Educators and welfare agencies now recognise that early abuse and neglect significantly affects brain function. Research by Dr Bruce Perry from the Child



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Trauma Academy in the US has noted the prevalence of childhood abuse in adults diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was the first to observe the similarities between the effects of traumatic events on the developing brain and the biological abnormalities found in people with schizophrenia.

This forms part of Dr Perry's wider research, which is regarded as ground-breaking because it demonstrates that abuse and neglect alter the biology of the brain, and can have a profound effect on a child's ability to learn. His academy has worked with 1000 maltreated children for more than 15 years, recording increases in IQ when children are placed in safe, nurturing environments.

In a study of more than 200 children under the age of six who were removed from their parents following abuse and neglect, significant developmental delays were found in 85 per cent of the children, with problems such as learning difficulties, motor skill delays and mental health issues increasing with age.

Those working with troubled young people recognise the importance of Dr Perry's findings and believe more needs to be done.

It is clear that early trauma can affect cognitive function in many different ways, says Sandie de Wolf, the chief executive of Berry Street Victoria, Victoria's largest independent child and family welfare agency.

Ms de Wolf, who was awarded an Order of Australia last year for her work with young people, says language and cognitive delays and mental health issues related to abuse or neglect contribute to young people dropping out of school early.

More than 13 per cent of those aged 15 to 20 are not working or studying, according to a 2008 study by the Foundation for Young Australians.

The lack of action to help these young people worries Child Safety Commissioner Bernie Geary. "We hug ourselves gleefully in terms of the 87 per cent who are succeeding," he says.

He recently met alternative education providers who expressed their frustration at a lack of funding. "A common theme is that it's very difficult to be acknowledged as part of the system."

Mr Geary says this is partly because the Education Department does not recognise

the link between abuse and neglect and an inability to concentrate and learn, let alone how widespread the problem is. "There is a dearth of understanding. I don't think the department as an institution buys this."

Marg Hamley, the director of services at Berry Street, works with many children who have an intellectual disability related to their abuse, whether from their actual experience or an impoverished environment.

"By the time they come to us they are often in their teenage years, and when we get them assessed they often have an intellectual disability that no one has paid attention to because it is their behaviour that might be more confronting to people. They are streetwise and might have the gift of the gab but have limited ways of expressing themselves. They have often disengaged from education. It's a recipe for disaster."

Research on abused and neglected children reveals they often have disturbed sleep, which leads to poor concentration, and also often have language delays and difficulties with memory, making it harder to listen, understand or express themselves.

Such children need more intensive help than a standard reading recovery program. Berry Street has been providing follow-up training for teachers that builds on a guide to working with traumatised children published by the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, *Calmer Class-rooms*. Teachers learn different ways of responding rather than kicking difficult students out of the class.

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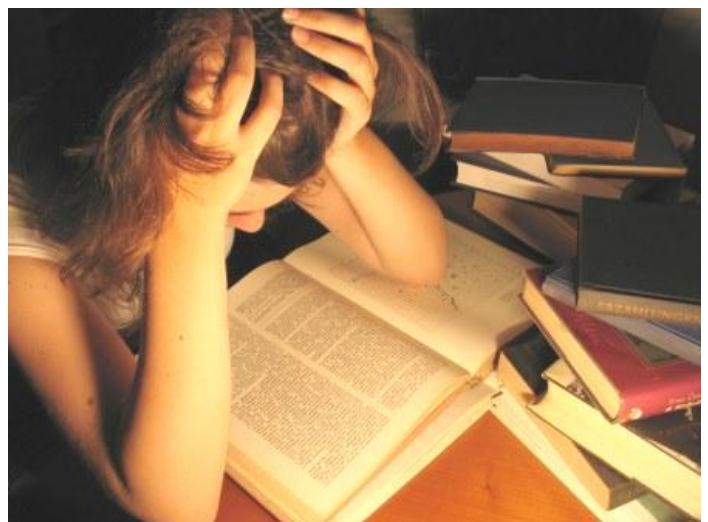
which leads to poor concentration, and also often have language delays and difficulties with memory, making it harder to listen, understand or express themselves. Such children may need information broken up into small manageable pieces before they can complete a task.

Such children crave control, which can lead to conflicts with teachers and other students. They often have unstable living situations and don't get on with other students because they lack basic relationship skills, such as the notion of taking turns.

Mr Geary says teachers need more training to work with such students. "They are desperately hungry for more information and understanding of this issue."

Emma McCarthy trains teachers and tradesmen at Hands On Learning, a school-based practical building and support program for students likely to leave early, on how to deal with traumatised children. "Abuse and neglect does damage the development of the brain. It becomes primed for danger," she says.

She says staff have to deal with some students in a clinical state of distress and need to be aware that the school model of punishment exacerbates their anxiety, shame and humiliation.



"We have to work out what helps these kids to feel safe. They need strong relationships, structure but, paradoxically, also flexibility."

She warns teachers that such students sabotage positive relationships. "They get scared when they make a connection and they will burn that person off. They then serially bounce around."

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner has also published a guide for professionals and carers working with traumatised young people and is about to publish another for parents.

Berry Street runs an alternative school, with campuses in Noble Park and Morwell, for about 50 students aged 12 to 15 and is in partnership with the Pavilion in East Preston, an alternative school for older youth. "Alternative settings are important when young people have already become disengaged. But obviously the better solution is to stop that happening in the first place," Ms Hamley says.

As a former teacher and educational psychologist, Ms Hamley knows first-hand that schools need more resources so they can take greater responsibility for such children.

"Part of the problem has been that when a child is challenging it is very difficult for schools to manage and therefore there is an inclination to pass it on to somebody else. In Western countries we have got into the mindset of big schools that offer lots of choice for students, and for most children that's a good way to go, but for these children these big environments do not work. We need a mainstream system that has within it a greater range of options. There is a move in the United States to smaller scale schools of 150 maximum and we think that would make a big difference."

Such ideas have been explored by Big Picture Learning, a not-for-profit organisation that

runs small US schools offering a personalised education program. Viv White, the founder of Big Picture Education Australia, is establishing similar schools here, with Croydon Community School the first Victorian school to trial the approach.

No doubt Sandy Jeffs would have fared better in such a school. She says it was only the interest taken by a few teachers when she was in year 11 at Ballarat High School that made things bearable. "They changed my life," she says.

Barbara Hocking, the executive director of the national mental health charity SANE, says Ms Jeffs's experience demonstrates the importance of teachers who are empathetic, particularly because young people with mental health issues — with the most common being anxiety and depression — often don't understand what is happening to them.

"There is a lot that teachers and other young people can do when a young person is starting to feel very different and alone. Often what people need is just what everybody needs, someone to take an interest in them and to show they care."

When Ms Jeffs was in a psychiatric hospital last year, she was placed in the adolescent ward because the adult ward was full. "I remember thinking, as I watched the young kids, that I hoped their journey with mental illness would be less difficult than mine. I was then 34 years on, or they were me 34 years ago. I was full of sadness for them and thought how cruel of life to shackle them with such unendurable mental illnesses. It just didn't seem fair."

Ms Hocking believes the federal government's MindMatters mental health program in secondary schools has helped. "I like to think if Sandy was at school today the situation would be very different as there are many more supports around. However, it's

absolutely criminal that there are still kids missing out."

Not all schools are aware of what is available. "In some schools links to the mental health support system are well made and in others not at all," she says. Ms Hocking urges schools to forge links with local networks of Headspace, the national youth mental health foundation, and Orygen, a national youth mental health organisation. Parents are often unaware of what is available, which is why teachers should alert students to counselling services such as Kids Helpline and ReachOut.com.

Dr Martha Burns, an American expert on learning difficulties who visited Melbourne recently, says latest research in neuroscience shows that young people who stay in senior high school experience an extra spurt in brain development, whereas those who drop out earlier miss out. "Numerous US studies also show a correlation between young people leaving school early and an increase in the crime and incarceration rate," she says.

Professor Alan Hayes, director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, says early intervention alone is not enough to help damaged children.

"That doesn't minimise the importance of a good start in education but it's a little naive to think that everything will be fixed through early intervention because a lot of problems don't emerge until later in life, and in terms of sustainable impact you need to intervene at multiple points across the lifetime."

He says programs such as the Smith Family's Learning for Life program helps disadvantaged children stay at school because it spans vulnerable transition points, such as moving from home to primary school and from school to further study or work.



Trudy Hanson OAM

**Manager NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief
Grief Counsellor & Educator**

Welcome to the first issue of the Bereavement Buddy for 2010 (better late than never!) June has come upon us so fast. Our Centre in Dubbo has been overwhelmed with referrals for this half of the year and we have also spent the first half of the year conducting training throughout NSW.

This issue of the Bereavement Buddy focuses on abuse and the effect that it can have on early development of the brain. The research by Dr Bruce Perry clearly illustrates the effects of traumatic experiences on the developing brain. I hope you enjoy the article.

Information for Support Volunteers

Supervision

Supervision is mandatory for all NALAG Support Volunteers. Dr. Geoffrey Glassock will conduct supervision on **Monday 21st June 2010 starting 12.00 - 2.00 pm.**

If you are seeing clients at present you are required to attend. Please call the NALAG Centre on 6882 9222 to confirm your attendance.

Statistics

Volunteer statistics forms are due 7 days after the end of the month (7th of the next month). Please make sure you complete your statistics from each month and return to the NALAG Centre by fax: 02 6884 9100 or email nalag@hwy.com.au.

For Your Diary...coming events

June 2010

Seniors Morning Tea - Dubbo

- When:** Tuesday, 8th June, 2010
- Time:** 10.00 am
- What is it?** Morning Tea at the NALAG Centre and an opportunity for seniors to connect and make some new friends.
- RSVP:** To RSVP call Shelley or Paula on 6882 9222.

Supervision - Dubbo

- When:** Monday 21st June 2010
- Time:** 12.00 - 2.00pm
- Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief
Welchman Street
- RSVP:** 02 6882 9222

Laughter Yoga - Dubbo

- When:** Thursday, 17th June 2010
- Time:** 10.00am - 12.00 Noon
- Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief
Welchman Street
- What is it?** Breathing, gentle stretching and simulated laughter exercises designed to enhance your childlike playfulness, **boost your immune system, improve your sense of wellbeing.**
- RSVP:** 02 6882 9222
- More Info:** www.nalag.org.au

July 2010

Sandplay Therapy

1 Day Workshop - Dubbo

Sandplay Therapy is a play-based technique that is a valuable tool for counsellors looking for a non-verbal, less intrusive, and fun adjunct to the mainly cognitive and behavioural modalities of traditional "talking" therapies. It is a self-directed and expressive therapy, and suitable for use by adults and children alike from many client populations. It provides a multiple intelligences perspective, and has proved an effective aid in helping the processing, containment, and healing of emotional trauma - such as grief, anxiety, aggression, and even physical pain.

- When:** Friday, 9th July, 2010
- Time:** 9.00am- 5.00 pm
- Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief
Welchman Street
- Cost:** \$220.00 (inc GST)
- Includes Morning Tea, Light Lunch, Afternoon Tea and a Comprehensive Manual

All enquires and bookings:

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Website: www.nalag.org.au

Discounts on NALAG Education

Become a Member of NALAG you will receive concessional prices on some courses offered by NALAG. You will also receive the *NALAG News* publication together with the Bereavement Buddy E-Newsletter. See our website www.nalag.org.au for Membership forms.