

FOSTERING DIFFERENCE

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCE?

The Relationship Between Early Life Adversity and
Developmental Difference

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'It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.'

Maya Angelou

Acknowledgment:

This resource is part of a series of resources for foster parents who are raising children living with developmental difference caused by early life adversity. The guides are intended to provide general educational information only, and are not a substitute for professional assessment and intervention.

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What Is Developmental Difference?

As a foster parent, have you ever wondered why it is that your child has more difficulty in following instructions, regulating their behaviour, and learning new ways of behaving than other children? The answer may be your child's **developmental difference**. But what is developmental difference and how does it come about?

Developmental difference refers to the **unique set of differences** your child can experience due to their early life experiences. Developmental difference is as simple as the name implies- a difference in development caused by developmental experiences that are different to other children's.

Developmental Difference is the result of developmental experiences that are DIFFERENT to other children.

What kind of Developmental Differences have children in care experienced?

By the time a child enters out-of-home care they are likely to have experienced a range of very different developmental experiences than other children. These early adverse experiences impact on a child's development. We now believe that early adversity leaves a child with a range of developmental differences that can make them more vulnerable to developing behaviour problems.

What kind of early life adversities are children in foster care likely to have experienced? By the time children come into foster care, they are likely to have experienced at least one of several possible adverse events. While the experiences of each child entering care will be unique, they are likely to include one or more of the following:

- Exposure to toxins, drugs and alcohol in the womb- affecting the development of their brains in specific ways.
- Caregivers that were unable or unwilling to meet their basic nutritional and physical needs; affecting their brain development, physical growth, and social development.
- Experience of early caregivers as dangerous, unreliable, or powerless to protect them from danger; affecting their beliefs about the role of adults in children's lives, and how to relate to adults.
- Witnessing a traumatic event or experiencing traumatic loss of a loved one; affecting their belief in the need to control future events.



- Seeing and learning un-helpful ways to problem solve and communicate their needs by observing these approaches in key adults in their family; affecting their regard for discipline and consequences.
- Experience of needing to provide physical care or protection for a parent or siblings; affecting their ability to focus on their own needs in the here and now.
- Physical or sexual abuse; affecting their sense of self-worth and their ability to express and receive affection in safe ways.
- Exposure to toxic stress, trauma and neglect, affecting cognitive, language and motor skill development.

Any or all of the above developmentally different experiences can have an impact on how children's brains develop. This in turn affects their behaviour. It means we need to approach behaviour management and parenting differently. The resources in this series focus on developmental differences in brain, language and social development and how these affect children's support needs. They are intended to highlight the need to respond differently to children's behaviour. They were also developed specifically for foster parents in recognition of the to these children's lives.

What do these Developmental Differences look like?

The way that adverse developmental events affect children varies. But there are common patterns of difference that can affect the way your child views and processes the world. Developmental differences vary according to the unique experiences of each child but some of the common developmental differences experienced by children in out of home care include:

- Differences in executive functioning skills (planning, organisation and monitoring behaviour)
- Difficulty with memory, especially for verbal instructions
- Differences in sensory processing (over or under sensitive to the sensory world)
- Differences in emotional regulation (over or under responsive)
- Differences in language development (understanding and communicating using words)
- Difference in intellectual or physical ability and pervasive developmental disorders.



Foster Care and Developmental Difference

Once children are placed into a foster home we often expect that they will feel safe and begin to thrive. It can be difficult and disheartening in cases when this doesn't happen easily. Yet it seems that at least 2 out of every 10 placements experience significant difficulty and instability despite the child's being placed in a foster home that provides predictable and safe care.

It can be difficult for us to understand why children who are now in a safe and nurturing environment continue to struggle. Why do they have difficulty in learning from their experiences? Why do they have difficulty in adjusting to new routines? Why don't they seem to respond to typical parental discipline and consequences? Why do they seem to be unable to remember how to do something you have seen them do so many times before? Why do they seem to tune out at odd times? Why can some seem fearful for no apparent reason? The answer often lies in their different developmental experiences. The resources in this series describe some of the reasons we think that children in foster care need to be supported differently.

The role a foster parent plays in children's recovery is critical. There seem to be four main influences that shape the life outcomes of children and the extent of the impact on children who are placed in foster care.

These are:

- The possible influence of a toxic pre- birth environment on brain development; for example exposure to alcohol or other substances in utero.
- The possible influence of a toxic early relationship environment and traumatic events; for example abusive care giving or living with family violence.
- The supports and skills of the foster parent or caregiver who supports the child; the social, practical and emotional support the carer receives from others, and the carer's commitment and responsiveness to the child's unique needs.
- The coping skills of young people themselves; for example learning the skills of self-regulation, goal setting, or engaging in therapy for traumatic events.

While there may be four main types of influence; you will notice that ***a foster parent plays a central*** role in many of these areas.



We believe that the quality of the foster parent relationship is central to children's recovery from early adversity. The resources in this series are designed to support foster parents and to acknowledge the DIFFERENCE that FOSTERING makes to children's lives. The resources in this series provide strategies to determine which areas of your child's development may be different, and provide information about how to support your child's development in areas of difference.

The resources in this series are designed to complement the warm and nurturing parenting; appropriate boundaries and consequences. Safe, responsive and nurturing parenting is *sufficient* for many children. The resources in this series are intended for those children where nurturing care is not sufficient. The resources are intended as a toolkit of options and ideas in the case where extra specialist support might be needed due to neuro-developmental difference – whether due to disability, the impact of abuse, trauma or other early life adversity. They are intended to provide ideas and tips on how to support children that do not respond easily to traditional discipline; and where more a tailored approach might be needed.

'A lot of Different flowers make a bouquet' ***Muslim origin***

To find out more about Developmental Difference and your child,
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