

# Angry Boys

or

Anxious, Distressed, and Traumatized Children.

**Why are our children angry and what can we do to help them and their teachers?**

Gavin Oliver – Principal Pukete School, Sabbatical Report Term 4 2016

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## **Introduction**

We have in our schools what appears to be a growing number of children that are angry. Anecdotally principals tell me they are concerned about “angry” children that wreak havoc in their schools. In fact one principal of a very large school in Auckland described “angry children” as being of epidemic proportions. These children explode violently, throwing chairs, fighting and swearing, or they take flight and run off in a rage, often for no apparent reason.

The purpose of this report is to examine why these children are “angry” and to suggest a range of strategies to help them, and their teachers. The intended audience are teachers, support staff, and principals. Please note that the author does not regard himself as an expert on this topic, and the strategies listed, while partly based on experience, are taken from readings, research, videos, and conversations with professionals.

## **What We See and Hear is Quite Possibly the Tip of The Iceberg.**

We see the rage, the destruction, and the hurt these children present, but what we don’t see are that these “angry children” have **often** suffered major trauma in their lives. They may have been abused and/or neglected, and perhaps suffering major mental health issues as a consequence. (Neglect includes non-attachment to a significant adult).

Neuro science tells us that children who are abused and/or neglected don’t develop critical neural pathways in their brains that allow them to regulate or control their emotions. *“The early childhood brain grows and develops faster than at any stage in their lives and the way it develops in these early years is critical.” (Dr Judith A Howard – Distressed or Deliberately Defiant - Page 37)*

The brain is made up of four main sections;

### **Brain Stem**

- where the spinal cord merges into the brain
- controls functions such as body temperature, heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and also controls the “fight, flight, and freeze” responses
- most developed part of brain before birth, and continues to develop in very early years, 0-3years
- **is susceptible to harm due to alcohol, substance abuse, *trauma and/or neglect***

### **Cerebellum**

- next to brain stem at rear of head
- manages body movement
- matures over first five years of life
- **is susceptible to decreased volume and therefore functionality due to *trauma and/or neglect***

### **Limbic System**

- inner part of the brain
- manages attachment and emotion
- comprised of the **amygdala** which regulates emotional response and behaviour, and the **hippocampus** which is responsible for memory and learning
- **is developed by 3 to 4 years of age and is susceptible to considerable harm due to *trauma and/or neglect*. The amygdala can become overactive, thus easily triggering a “fight or flight” response.**

### **Cortex and Prefrontal Cortex**

- regulates functions including language and interpretation and management of sensory input - learning
- also regulates complex functions including abstract thinking and decision making
- is not fully developed until the 20's
- **damage to the limbic system and/or brain stem is likely to adversely affect the functioning of the cortex and prefrontal cortex i.e. thinking and reasoning skills**

## **Trauma and neglect adversely affects brain development, especially in the early years.**

*“If children live in a chaotic or threatening world, one in which the caregivers respond with abuse or chronically provide no response, (neglect) their brains may become hyper alert for danger or not fully develop.” (Understanding the effects of maltreatment on brain development. Washington, DC: U.S Department of Health and Human Science.)*

In other words; children that become very angry very quickly **may** have reduced brain functioning due to abuse or neglect or both. I am not suggesting all “angry children” have suffered from abuse or neglect, however they may have.

To read the full article from which the above quote was taken please use the following link:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/brain-development>

In summary we know that trauma may affect children in a number of ways;

- Poorly developed motor skills
- Reduced cognitive capacity
- Difficulty self-regulating emotional responses (behaviour and anger issues)
- Increased anxiety
- Language delays
- Difficulty developing and maintaining relationships with both adults and peers – distressed attachment issues
- Low self-esteem or feelings of low self-worth

“Children who have suffered chronic abuse or neglect often experience developmental delays across a broad spectrum, including cognitive, language, motor and socialisation skills (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996).

“One of the key messages to emerge in recent times is that trauma affects the whole person: their mind, brain, spirit and relationships with others,”  
(Victoria State Government - Calmer Classrooms - Page 4. )

### **How prevalent is child abuse in New Zealand?**

No one really knows the true rate of child abuse in New Zealand, however the Child Matters reports that from 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016 there were 16,394 substantiated findings of child abuse in New Zealand. These figures are published on their website

[www.childmatters.org.nz](http://www.childmatters.org.nz)

It is considered that many more cases of abuse go unreported. These numbers are alarming and confirm that many of our children are, or have been abused and/or neglected.

## **How can schools help children displaying signs of trauma?**

### **(Great for all kids.)**

#### **Understand the Child**

By understanding that abuse and/or neglect are often the cause of extreme behaviour we see in children, we are more likely to develop a sense of compassion and empathy for the child.

#### **Believe the child is good**

Is the disruptive child choosing their behaviour or do they have little control over their behaviour? If we think a child is “naughty” or “bad” because they have angry uncontrolled outbursts we are unlikely to be able to develop empathy for the child.

#### **Build a positive relationship with the child**

Building a positive relationship with traumatised, and all children, will help them and us immensely. They need to know that we like them and care about them. (If you don’t, then fake it until you do!) As their trauma may be a result of abusive relationships then it follows that recovery needs to occur in the context of relationships.

“Recovery from trauma will occur best in the context of healing relationships. For a child to have a positive view of him or herself reflected in the eyes of a trusted, caring adult counteracts the negative internal view he or she has and heals the terrifying experience of abuse.” (State Government Victoria – Calmer Classrooms P. 7)

**These children by their very nature may test the relationship over and over again.** They are likely to feel unworthy of a positive relationship so they may unconsciously test us by striking out, and swearing, especially when they are angry.

#### **Build a positive relationship with the child’s family/whanau**

Working with the family or whanau in a positive way is essential but can be challenging, especially if things aren’t going well. By inviting the family to meetings and encouraging them to be part of the plan for the child the chances of buy-in are increased. Circumstances may arise when the school and family agree to disagree. It may be helpful to have one point of contact between the family and school, possibly the team leader – see below. Be mindful not to judge the family.

#### **Avoid Punishing**

Why would we want to punish a child that has had a major anger outburst or meltdown? Possibly, in the hope that the behaviour will not occur again. If we accept that the child suffering from trauma and has little or no control over their behaviour, punishing an angry outburst would seem to be misguided. The problem with punishment is that it tends to

damage relationships. Certainly careful use of natural consequences and/or restorative justice may be appropriate.

Difficulties do arise when the child has hurt another child, or adult. Principals in particular are faced with the dilemma of how to show justice has been done and care for the victim and perpetrator.

### **Predict, Prepare, and Prevent**

#### **Predict**

As teachers, we are often able to predict behaviours; “I knew he would lose it for that reliever.” If we can predict behaviour the challenge is then to prevent the behaviour. If Johnny is likely to lose control when his teacher is away we can develop a plan. Possibly Johnny could spend the day in the class of the teacher he had last year.

#### **Prepare and Prevent**

**Food** – make sure the traumatised child has eaten breakfast and lunch. An empty stomach is likely to make most of us grumpy, even more so for a traumatised child.

**Safe Place and Safe Person** (Also see the Crisis plan below.) Try and identify possible behavioural triggers – what causes the child to explode? For example a trigger may be the traumatised child being teased. The preparation may involve coaching the child about how to react and what to do if they are teased. This may look like the child having a “safe place” and/or “safe adult”. The “safe place” is somewhere they can go in the school to calm, away from any threat. The “safe person” is an adult in the school whom they trust and they feel can help them with a problem. Part of the coaching needs to include practising going to the “safe place” and finding the “safe person”.

Obviously, it is also important to reduce the likelihood of the trigger occurring. Remind children of the consequences of teasing.

It can be useful to not only brief all the staff in a school about a particular child with high behavioural needs but it can be helpful to also brief their classmates. This needs to be done in a sensitive manner with the approval of both the child in question and their parents/caregiver. This may assist classmates to understand and respond to the child in a more helpful manner.

#### **Coach the child to recognise their signs that they are about to explode.**

As we get angry our bodies and minds will give us warning signs, such as sweaty hands, racing heart, “funny tummy” and “bad thoughts”. If an angry child is able to recognise these signs they may be able to gain some control preventing an “explosion”. I think the best strategy is to teach them to walk away and go to the “safe place.” If they get to the safe place give them plenty of time to calm and praise and celebrate their self-regulation. Teach these children to recognise and control their triggers and responses.

#### **Pick Your Battles**

We are content with adapting our responses and environment for children with disabilities we can see, and that is commendable and how it should be. However we struggle making adaptations for children who have suffered trauma as we can’t actually see the damage.

When teaching and caring for traumatised children we do need to “pick our battles” and bend and be flexible to meet their needs. Don’t back them into a corner by being uncompromising and belligerent and don’t wind them up. The analogy of a can of coke may be useful. Many of our children arrive at school each day like a can of coke that has been shaken, except they are stressed and anxious. If we don’t want coke all over us, we don’t shake and then open the can.

### **Mentor**

One of the team, probably the manager, (see below) can act as a “mentor” for the child concerned by supporting the class teacher and child. The function of this person is to; to build a positive relationship with the child, be the “safe person,” act as a “check in check out”, and generally keep an eye on the child.

### **Use Codes and Symbols**

This refers to a non- verbal and private system of communication between child and teacher. For example the teacher may raise their eyes and give a discrete thumb up after lunch break as way of checking in. A nod in response from the child would confirm that they are okay. Another symbol may be a card the child can use if they feel they need “chill time.”

### **Rhythm and Movement Activities**

Dr Judith Howard in her book “Distressed or Deliberately Defiant” talks about the importance of rhythm and movement; “Research has also indicated important neural connections between the cerebellum and the frontal cortex, which implies that there is an important neurological relationship between movement and learning that can be hampered through early childhood trauma.” (P. 65) Therefore rhythm, movement, and music may assist in the neurological development not only for traumatised children but for all children. The work of Jenny Mosley may be helpful in bringing rhythm and music to the classroom. Her website is;

**<http://www.circle-time.co.uk/resources>**

### **Run regular Circle Time**

Circle Time is a great vehicle for teaching social skills and is a valuable component in all classes. By making Circle Time a regular event we will help all children, especially the traumatised child. See Jenny Mosley’s website above.

### **Run a class that is structured, routine, consistent, and positive.**

The class ethos – established structure, rules, programme, modus operandi; must first meet the needs of the most behavioural needy child/ren in the class. Otherwise chaos will ensue, and the learning of all children will be affected. Remember:  
What is good for traumatised children is good for all children.

Structure and routine “trap” children into compliance.

Traumatised children have very little internal structure or sense of control. Teachers who deliver a highly structured learning environment provide a feeling of security and compliance for children. In turn, this feeling of security and compliant behaviour helps to build a positive relationship between the child and teacher.

Teach the behaviours you want. At the beginning of the school year teachers should make a list of the behaviours they wish the children to exhibit and then teach the behaviours, and then practice and reward the behaviours. For example if a teacher wants children to be able to take turns when playing a board game they cannot assume all children will be able to take turns so they need to teach the skills, have children practise and then strongly reinforce the desired behaviour.

Develop a class reward system that acknowledges and rewards the behaviour you want.

### **Use a team approach**

Teaching and working with children with high emotional and social needs related to possible trauma is extremely challenging, therefore it helps to have a team approach to spread the load, build expertise, keep everyone safe, and increase the opportunities for success. The following guidelines are adapted from Dr Judith Howard’s book “Distressed or Deliberately Defiant.”

#### **The Team may Include**

1. Team Leader (Manager) is responsible for convening regular meetings, being the point of contact and information regarding the child, ensuring the class teacher is supported. (Could be Principal, DP, AP, or SENCO) This person needs to have a positive relationship with the child and their family and those that work directly with the child – teacher and learning assistant, professional support (possibly RTLB or MOE Behaviour person) as their job is the glue that holds everything together and their other big job is to see the plan happens.
2. Class teacher – obviously



3. SENCO – if not team manager
4. Deputy or Assistant Principal - if not the team manager
5. Learning Assistant that works with the child
6. Parent, caregiver, whanau
7. Professional support – psychologist, Ministry of Education personnel, social workers and so on
8. Occasionally, it may be appropriate to include the child themselves in the team.

**NB** - While it is important to include everybody that has a role related to the child, try to avoid having a team that is so big that it becomes difficult to manage, and is overly time-consuming.

#### Team within a team

On a day to day basis it is possibly a good idea to have a small team of three that look after the day-to-day management of the child.

#### Understanding

Try to ensure that the team knows the child or knows about the child so they have an understanding of the child and their needs. Also, the team needs to have some knowledge of trauma-related behaviour.

#### School Wide Support

All personnel in the school require some understanding of the child in the hope they can take the child's needs in to consideration when interacting with the child. We need the whole staff to be an extension of the team. We also want to ensure that mythology doesn't grow about the child, that they are "all bad."

#### Support Plan

One of the key functions of the team will be to develop a plan to meet the child's needs, and to ensure that the class teacher, learning assistant, and family/whanau are supported too. The plan will also need to be reviewed and monitored. While the plan needs to be holistic in that it emphasises a range of needs, the focus should be on developing relationships and self-regulation.

## Have a Crisis Plan or Safety Plan

This is a Safety Plan that MOE Special Education have developed that schools may find useful. Please contact them if you would like support developing such a plan.

The really important thing to consider is that every adult in the school knows what to do in a crisis and that the parents have an understanding of the plan.

# SUPPORT PLAN / SAFETY PLAN

### 1. IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

<b>Name of Learner:</b>	
<b>Date of Birth/Age:</b>	<b>Age:</b>
<b>Date of Plan:</b>	
<b>Plan completed by:</b>	

### 2. TEAM MEMBERS

Name:	Role:

Describe the Behaviour		Staff Action
	When all is well. This is what we want	
Anxious	Anxiety 1 <sup>st</sup> Level of Behaviour Escalation Do Something Now	Supportive
Defensive	Defence 2 <sup>nd</sup> Level of Behaviour	Directive

	Escalation Still able to reason	
Acting Out	Physically Acting Out 3 <sup>rd</sup> Level – Most Dangerous Level Unable to reason	Management/Safety (NVPI)
De-escalation	Tension Reduction Student now lower in mood than normal	Re-build relationship/Re-establish verbal communication.

### Debriefing after an incident or crisis –

**The child** . After an incident or crisis has occurred do we debrief with the “angry” child? The first and really important thing is that we need to allow plenty of time for the child to calm. Five minutes will definitely not do it, and it may take more than an hour. Secondly some “angry” children can actually not remember what has happened due to their poor brain functioning, so when they say they can’t remember they may well be telling the truth. If there is an opportunity for the child to gain some learning as a result of the debrief and/or gain some restoration for the victim then it is worth the effort. (For some children a “debrief” may only increase their feeling of anxiety and make things worse.) Try to have the child explain what happened, focusing on; fixing things up, showing empathy for the hurt or damage done including restoration, and what the child can do to prevent a similar incident occurring again. It may be useful to use a drawing of a bomb with wick – a rough-hand drawing is fine as most children will recognise the “bomb.” Bring to their attention that they are the bomb. Ask questions such as “What made the bomb go off?” They may need help co-constructing a response. “What did it feel like before the bomb went off?” Help them to talk about how they were feeling and what physical sensations they were experiencing. Introduce a pair of scissors to the drawing and ask them about cutting the

wick, ask “How could we have cut the wick and stop the bomb going off?” Make a plan to prevent future incidents, and restoration and help them carry it out.

### **The adults**

Debriefing after a crisis or incident is very difficult. Time is the first inhibiting factor, but probably the most difficult part is deciding on who will facilitate the process and knowing the purpose of the debriefing. The probable reason for a debriefing is to consider what happened and what we can learn, and to check that everybody is okay. However as this is a very complex process the risk is that we may not achieve either goal. This role may have been traditionally undertaken by the Principal, however it is likely they will have been involved in the incident and therefore have an emotional connection and need to be “debriefed” too. The persons affected by the incident need to be comfortable with and have some trust of the facilitator, otherwise the “debrief” may become stressful in itself. Hopefully the child concerned and the school will be receiving outside agency support, possibly the crisis plan should include a “debrief” plan that the team are happy with. (Please see crisis plan below.)

## **Building Resilience and Self-Regulation is good for all children, and particularly good for traumatised children.**

I have chosen to include and adapt some of the suggestions relating to the building of resilience developed by Karen Walker a psychologist from Australia . The reason I like their work is that it fits perfectly with the needs of traumatised children and “normal” children, particularly by emphasising the importance of positive relationships. The following link may be of interest; <http://www.heysigmund.com/building-resilience-children/>

### **1. Build Relationships**

Positive relationships help a child to develop resilience as the nurturing and caring of a parent or caregiver help the brain to develop and regulate reactions to stress. The child will also develop a sense that “everything will be okay” because it has been the case in the past.

### **2. Build Connections – Good relationships with lots of people**

The more positive connections with people the better, as this will enhance brain development, trust, and the notion of everything being okay.

### **3. Ask for help**

Encourage children to ask for help and to discuss their concerns. Reassure and encourage them to find solutions, this dialog helps get our thoughts in order.

#### **4. Build Executive Functioning**

("Executive Functioning" refers to attention control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, reasoning, problem solving, impulse control, and planning)

- Have well-established routines – more to come later in this paper
- Model healthy social behaviour
- Help create and maintain reliable and positive relationships
- Provide opportunities for social connections, for example this might mean, the organising of play opportunities
- Encourage creative play
- Encourage the playing of board games, sounds a bit weird I know, remember how we played board games in the old days? Helps with taking turns, impulse control, planning, working memory and mental flexibility. Definitely have some no device time.
- Encourage memory games
- Provide opportunities for children to act independently and make their own decisions.

**5. Teach Mindfulness** – watch this video by Dan Siegel to see how Mindfulness can help. It also explains how the brain develops.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vESKrzvgA40>

Also follow this link for Mindful activities that might be useful in a classroom – <http://www.heysigmund.com/mindfulness-for-children-fun-effective-ways-to-strengthen-mind-body-spirit/>

#### **6. Exercise**

Exercise has great power to strengthen and reorganise the brain, reducing anxiety and stress. To further reduce anxiety be sure to include non-competitive and co-operative activities for children. To produce mood -natural endorphins make the activity vigorous.

#### **7. Teach children they can do hard things.**

When we do something that is hard it increases our ability to do another thing that is hard. Praise the effort, "You were scared to make that speech, but you worked hard and did it!" "You can do hard stuff." Remind children they can do, what they perceive to be hard stuff.

#### **8. Teach Optimism**

"Optimism has been found to be one of the key characteristics of resilient people. The brain can be rewired to be more optimistic through the experiences it is exposed to." (Building Resilience In Children – see web site above)

- Be a positive role model. Look for and point out the good side of experiences and events.

- Avoid and actively discourage  
Personalising – “I am to blame.”  
Globalising – “I always do everything wrong.”  
Catastrophizing - “I always get it wrong.”
- Teach children that we learn through mistakes.
- Have children set goals – not too many, that are achievable and support them to achieve them.
- Challenge negativity by encouraging children to look beyond a pessimistic view.

### **9. Teach Growth Mind Set**

“Growth Mind Set” is a belief that the most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work, that our brain can adapt and grow. Google, “Growth Mind Set” and go nuts.

### **10. Ask how not why.**

When problems arise; ask “how” questions rather than “why” questions to focus on solutions rather than blame: “How can we fix this up?” “How can we make this better?” “How can we prevent this happening again?”

### **And Finally**

Teaching traumatised children is a very tough assignment and unfortunately the resourcing to support schools and children is not great. Spending more money on psychologists and behavioural specialists to support children, families, and schools would be of huge benefit to all and save enormous amounts of money down the track.

Good luck!

### **Useful Resources;**

A short listed of resources you might find useful;

**Dr Judith Howard - *Distressed or Deliberately Defiant?*** A very useful book that is easy reading, available from Compass Seminars or Amazon. Dr Howard also holds seminars in New Zealand, which I can recommend. Again see Compass Seminars.

**Victoria State Government – Calmer Classrooms – A guide to working with traumatised children** Again very useful and readable. Can be downloaded;

[http://www.ccp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](http://www.ccp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf)

### **Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development**

US Department of Health and Human Services. Can be downloaded at

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/brain\\_development.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/brain_development.pdf)

Very useful for developing an understanding of brain development.

### **Attachment Disturbances and Managing Challenging Behaviour Within The School**

A must read – quick and easy. Download from;

[http://www.cpri.ca/files/1514/5046/6705/Attachment\\_Disturbances\\_and\\_Managing\\_Challenging\\_Behaviour\\_Within\\_The\\_School\\_with\\_title\\_page.pdf](http://www.cpri.ca/files/1514/5046/6705/Attachment_Disturbances_and_Managing_Challenging_Behaviour_Within_The_School_with_title_page.pdf)

**Building Resilience in Children** – Download from [www.heysigmund.com](http://www.heysigmund.com) A website with many related articles.

### **Brain Development and Mindfulness**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vESKrzvgA40>

### **More on Mindfulness**

<http://www.heysigmund.com/mindfulness-for-children-fun-effective-ways-to-strengthen-mind-body-spirit/>

