

Neurodivergence Wales Webinar Summary: Neurodivergence, Trauma, and Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Introduction

This webinar explored the intersection of neurodivergence and developmental trauma in children and young people, particularly those with care experience. The session was led by professionals from Cardiff and Vale, aiming to deepen understanding, provoke thought, and support foster carers and professionals in their roles. The speakers discussed how early life experiences, including trauma and neurodevelopmental differences, shape behaviour, brain development, and emotional regulation.

Key Points

- Neurodivergence includes conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), sensory processing difficulties, and dyspraxia.
- Developmental trauma refers to the impact of adverse early experiences (e.g. neglect, abuse) on a child's development, particularly their brain and nervous system.
- A baby's development is influenced by the mother's emotional and physical state during pregnancy. Exposure to stress, drugs, or alcohol in utero can significantly affect brain development.
- The brain develops from the bottom up. Trauma can cause children to become 'stuck' in survival mode, affecting emotional regulation and higher-level thinking.
- Trauma affects sensory development, dissociation, attachment, emotional and behavioural regulation, cognition, and self-concept.
- Trauma can mimic or mask neurodivergent traits, making diagnosis complex.
- Polyvagal Theory explains how the nervous system responds to safety and danger. Co-regulation with calm, attuned adults helps children feel safe.
- The 3 Rs Framework: Regulate (help the child feel safe), Relate (build trust), Reflect (support understanding and expression).

Notable Quotes

- "Children regulate their emotions through the nervous systems of the adults they trust." – Dr Bruce Perry
- "Developmental trauma happens within key relationships and is also repaired within key relationships." – Dr Allan Schore

- “Feeling safe is the foundation for healing, learning, and connection.”

Actionable Takeaways

- Be Curious, Not Conclusive: Avoid jumping to diagnoses. Consider the child’s full story and context.
- Prioritise Safety: Create calm, predictable environments with consistent routines and warm, responsive caregiving.
- Use Body-Based Strategies: Engage in rhythmical, repetitive, and relational activities (e.g. walking, rocking, singing). Use sensory tools like chewy foods, deep pressure, or movement-based play.
- Co-Regulate: Model calmness and emotional regulation. Children mirror the emotional states of trusted adults.
- Support Before Assessment: Consider specialist assessments when trauma-informed approaches alone are insufficient, but always prioritise needs over labels.

Next Steps or Closing Remarks

The webinar concluded with a strong message: safe, supportive relationships are not just emotional anchors—they are the foundation for healthy brain development and lifelong learning. The speakers encouraged attendees to slow down, stay curious, and focus on building trust and safety before addressing behaviours or seeking diagnoses.