

# Why raising a child in care differs from raising your own child

Children only enter the out-of-home care system in Australia if there is messiness. The main reason children enter care is neglect, followed by emotional abuse. Neglect means not having basic needs met to grow and thrive, which can include anything from food to emotional needs. Then every time a child enters care, returns home, or moves foster or kinship care placement, the child suffers a broken attachment and their ability to re-attach, to trust, and to seek and give love appropriately is affected.

So regardless of what age a child enters care, they have already suffered a form of trauma and broken attachment.

Trauma has profound impacts on the brain; we see that in adults who suffer post-traumatic stress after one-off incidents or being exposed to war. The impact on a developing child's brain is even greater, as trauma affects the way different parts of the brain grow and how strongly or weakly different pathways form. And then, depending on the age at which a child experiences trauma – in utero, first two years, primary school years, or as a teenager – a different part of the brain is developing and is therefore affected. So the behaviours a child might exhibit will vary.

This is the same for our ability to attach to people around us. If we grow up in a loving home with parents who love us, meet our needs, comfort us, and model healthy relationships, we see other children and adults in this way, so can develop healthy attachments as we grow. If the adults around us haven't



had the ability to show us consistent attachments, or we experience broken attachments, then we grow up seeing other people as unpredictable, unsafe, not trustworthy; this can lead either to an inability to attach or to unhealthy attachments based on pleasing or sexualised behaviour.

Many children who enter the out-of-home care system have also been affected by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, developmental delays, hormonal imbalances or other health conditions. If their needs have not been met, they may have hoarding or over-eating tendencies.

The silver lining is that, just as a highly malleable developing brain is negatively affected by trauma and broken attachments, it is also susceptible to a positive environment. New neural pathways can develop to heal damaged parts of the brain and develop healthy, strong attachments. This is where your church can step in to provide a place of safety, community and healthy attachments, and change how a child develops and sees the world. At the same time, you can give a carer a much-needed break and support.

As a church community stepping up to support foster and kinship carers in your community and the children in their care, it is really important to understand the impact of trauma and attachment. Supporting a child's carer means understanding each carer's parenting choices and supporting them through your children's and youth ministries.

Parenting children in out-of-home care is often challenging and carers need their church community for support, respite, prayer and understanding. Carers will often need a break on a Sunday morning or by Friday night youth group, so making your children's church activities accessible and supportive will provide a carer with a much-needed break while also providing a child a place where they can find safety, nurturance, and an opportunity to develop healthy attachments.

We encourage you to chat to your children and youth church leaders about this information and see out further information and training.

Fostering Hope can come and provide a one-to-two-hour information session on trauma and attachment.

