

# Christmas for children and young people who have experienced developmental trauma



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## Introduction

Christmas is coming and for most children and young people this creates feelings of excitement and joyful anticipation as they recall their memories of Christmas past; family coming together, the magic, the surprise, the gifts, the food and even if there were moments of 'EastEnders' tension, they would be confident that by the end of the evening all would be 'forgiven', 'laughed off' and peace restored.

Unfortunately Christmas isn't like that for everyone.

Christmas is a time for a little indulgence however for some this could be over indulgence (alcohol and or drugs), a time to treat and spend but for some a time of increased debt, a time for family get togethers, however for some a reminder of broken relations and isolation, a time to cherish all that we have, the plentiful, though for some a reminder of what is not had, a time for giving but for some the experience of not receiving, a time for hugs and acts of love yet for some a crossing of physical and sexual boundaries. Christmas has the potential to turn an already emotionally tense situation and a dysregulated family into a powder keg waiting for one spark to cause an explosion. An explosion that could result in physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse.

## Children and young people with developmental trauma

Children and young people with developmental trauma may recall Christmas as the time when the adults around them, who perhaps were always unpredictable, frightening and abusive, become even more so – for these children and young people Christmas may be anticipated with terror.

Fundamental to supporting children and young people with developmental trauma is establishing a sense of safety – see earlier help sheet entitled 'The Importance of Feeling Safe'. Critical to this is known carers providing reliable, predictable daily routines and boundaries, a consistency of communication and response and clarity of expectations within containing and sensory balanced environments.

Christmas however often means a complete change in the norm – the environment is decorated, the lighting is different, bedtimes and getting up times may vary, the bedtime routine may be different in preparation for Santa, meal times may happen at different times, there may be unknown visitors, secret whispers and hiding, lots of surprises, loud noises from crackers, noisy toys or laughter.

It would seem then at a time when a traumatised child or young person is in most need of feeling safe, a time when they are anticipating terror, everything that may bring that sense of safety, changes.

## Research Findings

We know from research that children and young people with developmental trauma are hypersensitive to danger and when a threat is perceived they are thrown back into their primitive drive for survival and adopt states of 'Fight/Flight/Freeze' and within these present with many behaviours that may challenge:

- Not focussed, not listening, clumsy, daydreaming, aggressive, disruptive, loud, hyperactive, running away, hiding, silly voices, argumentative, controlling, confrontational, swearing or destructive.

It is no wonder that despite the carers living with a traumatised child or young person doing everything they can to provide the 'perfect' Christmas Day, it may instead be populated with these challenging behaviours.

## Tips for helping a child or young person 'feel' safe at Christmas

Pay attention to what we know about the children – what is their Internal Working Model, (Bowlby, J. 1969) how will they view, experience Christmas and how can we help this be a positive time.

### Try to make Christmas a predictable planned event:

- Talk about Christmas beforehand. Explore fears and hopes. Think about coping strategies.
- Involve the children in the planning, allow them to have some control over the events.
- Prepare a schedule for Christmas - who is around, what will happen when.
- Use the advent calendar as the countdown and schedule of events.

### Keep to the house routines:

- Eat meals at the usual times - eat the Christmas meal at the normal lunch or dinner time.
- Try to maintain the daily routines; particularly the child or young person's individualised routines for getting up, washing, dressing and bedtime.

### Keep to the house rules:

- Stick to the house or individual rules about time on social media or gaming consoles.
- Maintain the usual boundaries and behavioural expectations.

### Provide opportunities for emotional regulation:

- Build in quiet times to the festive days, after each exciting point providing time to calm, regulate and touch base.

- Make time to get some fresh air or take some physical exercise. Christmas is often a time spent cooped up indoors with the TV – allow opportunities for time outside, a pre or after dinner walk, time to 'let off steam'.
- Be thoughtful about noise levels, allocating a 'quiet room' where noisy games and activities are kept away from.
- Remind children and young people of their coping strategies, their soothing boxes and their regulating activities.

### Be thoughtful about food intake:

- Try to balance the sugary snacks with other food items, such as a glass of milk, fancy fruit and nuts rather than it all being sweets and chocolates.

### Keep grounded:

- Father Christmas is a figure of kindness, generosity and magic for most children, however we also narrate how this man comes unseen from nowhere and enters our bedrooms unnoticed. When heard literally the very idea seems unnerving to most of us but imagine how this would be heard by a child who has been terrorised by unknowns entering their safe spaces.

### Recognise the potential for carers to feel stressed and tense:

- Christmas raises lots of feelings for carers too and it is essential that they too spend some time preparing through their own reflection ensuring self-regulation and emotional availability for the child or young person.

## References

- Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss. New York: Basic Books.

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