

Healing children who are psychologically wounded by violence

Chris John is a London based psychotherapist who is internationally acknowledged for his specialisation in trauma reduction. We asked him for his thoughts on healing the trauma that besets so many children in South Africa today.

Education Rewired:

Many of our children are exposed to traumatic levels of violence such as domestic violence in the home, gang warfare on the streets and sexual abuse on a staggering scale. Your research shows that traumatic memories from early childhood become locked deeply within the limbic area of the brain and, as a result, these children are likely to experience 'developmental immaturity' in adult life. You say the 'wounded inner child' remains locked within the adult and manifests in characteristics such as...

Feelings of being 'less than'

A sense of being vulnerable and victimised

Struggles in taking responsibility for the self

Immature and uncontrolled behaviours

CHRIS JOHN:

Yes indeed. Until about age 5, the more active parts of our brain are the brainstem and limbic system which are impervious to understanding, language or logic. One of the functions of the limbic system is the scanning for potential danger and consequently, it is in the limbic system that associations develop – for example, between trauma and authority figures. The memories in this survival area of the brain, **are felt** more than remembered and their intensity can be triggered right the way into deep adulthood. We must become aware that children between the ages of 0 - 5 are susceptible to traumatic emotional wounding that will have lifetime implications.

Education Rewired:

You say that traumatised children develop defensive and adaptive coping mechanisms. Between the ages of 0 - 3 they minimise their psychic discomfort and pain through regression and withdrawal. Around age 3, they suppress their feelings and act out their thoughts in fantasy and play. By age 4, most children are successfully repressing their feelings without these feelings



having been tempered by any form of understanding from the cortical regions of the brain.

CHRIS JOHN:

Yes, the frontal cortex of the brain is where thinking takes place and comes into play only from about the age of 5. The frontal cortex is responsible for most of our analysing, learning, planning, paying attention and certain types of memory. So early traumatic experiences before the age of 5 that the child has now repressed, put him/her at risk of developmental immaturity in adulthood. However, with therapy, the traumatic imprint from this deeper part of the brain can be detoxified and discharged.

Education Rewired:

So you are saying South Africa is correct to bring Early Childhood Development into sharp focus and indeed that much of the violence and abuse in society is

Healing children cont...

perpetrated perhaps by adults suffering from developmental immaturity?

CHRIS JOHN:

Absolutely. Trauma is passed down through the generations. Therefore, in order to stop it we need to work with the children who have suffered at the hands of major caregivers. I fully believe the extreme violence in many countries, not only South Africa, is the legacy of attachment trauma which includes abuse, neglect and enmeshment. These youngsters are not given 'good enough care' as many are parented by adults who are themselves victims of abuse and suffer from developmental immaturity.

Education Rewired:

In our Caring Classrooms programme, we interact with young children who are often withdrawn or are already displaying violent behaviours. Yet, learning to care for the pets in their lives and to become guardians of the natural world, seems to have a profoundly healing effect on them. They become animated and our research shows that their confidence and sense of self-worth grows significantly. What are your thoughts on how humane education supports young children in their development? Is it an important mechanism for trauma reduction?

CHRIS JOHN:

Traumatized children develop what I refer to as **'silent or violent'** behaviour. Their need for human connection is what has been lost or denied. In this process children carry a sense of shame. Therefore they develop in equal measure a fear of wanting and rejecting connection.



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