



Understanding adolescents who have experienced early adversity



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A number of children in New Zealand experience adversity during their early years, such as chaotic or violent family environments, abuse, neglect, poverty, and parental substance use. These adverse experiences can contribute to a number of difficulties for them, through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. It's important that teachers and others working with adolescents understand how adversity can disrupt development and ways to provide much-needed support for these young people.

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When adverse experiences are severe, repeated or on-going, the fear and anxiety that young children experience can repeatedly activate stress response systems in their brain and body.¹ Without support from a close adult, stress response systems may become overloaded, affecting the structure and function of some areas of the developing brain.² The consequences of these brain changes can continue through adolescence and into adulthood.

Neuroplasticity

A young, developing brain is very sensitive or 'plastic' to the types of relationships and experiences children have.³ Patterns of connections in the brain change in response to patterns of experience.⁴ This is called neuroplasticity. When young children have loving relationships and feel safe, their brain is more likely to wire itself to help them develop, learn and behave in healthy ways.⁵ When their relationships and experiences are frightening to them or harmful, the brain can wire itself in ways that impact negatively on a child's well-being.⁶

While the brain is plastic throughout life and can change and re-organise itself in response to experiences, the older we get, the harder it becomes to alter circuits in the brain.⁷ Changing connections in a young, developing brain is easier. However, the adolescent brain is still more plastic than an adult brain, particularly during early adolescence.⁸ For adolescents who haven't fared well in their early years, this can be a period of opportunity. Positive relationships and experiences can change the circuitry of the brain in ways that may be lasting.⁹

What Can Happen?

Not all children who experience early stressful circumstances have poor outcomes, however they are more likely to do so. By the time these children start school, some will have emotional problems, disruptive behaviours and impaired executive functioning.¹⁰ Executive functioning involves the capacity to manage strong feelings, focus attention, control impulsive behaviours, follow directions and problem-solve.¹¹ Without these skills, children can struggle to learn, to behave in appropriate ways, to play co-operatively and to have successful friendships.¹² Without a change in circumstances, adolescents are likely to continue to have difficulties with learning, health and behaviour.¹³

Adolescents who experienced early adversity are more likely than others their age to go on to use tobacco, alcohol and drugs and have unprotected sex, increasing the risk for pregnancy.¹⁴ They're less likely to have good family and community support, may have on-going conflict with family and are at greater risk for mental health problems such as depression.¹⁵





Genes Play a Part

Some adolescents who experience early adversity have better outcomes as they grow than others. Genes combine with relationships and experiences to shape brain development. Children and adolescents can be less or more vulnerable to the harmful effects of early adversity due to the genes they were born with.¹⁶ The genetic make-up of some adolescents makes them more negatively affected by harmful relationships and experiences. However, these same adolescents may also benefit more than others from positive, supportive relationships and experiences.¹⁷

What Can Help

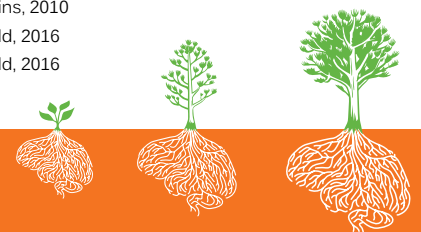
Plasticity during adolescence creates opportunities for positive changes that may offset some of the effects of adversity. Strengthening relationships can make a difference. Loving, healthy, support from parents and whānau is one of the most important protective factors.¹⁸

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Adolescents also need support from other trusted adults who treat them in respectful ways and who they feel genuinely care for them.¹⁹ Those who experienced early adversity and have problems in their relationships with their parents, are particularly in need of support from other adults. It's important that involved adults are aware that early adversity is likely to have negatively influenced an adolescent's development, health and behaviour.

Adolescents need safe and stable environments at home, at school and in their communities. Those who've experienced early adversity need support to build skills that help them adapt to and cope with stress. These skills include self-regulation, goal-setting, planning, problem-solving and being able to adapt to change.²⁰ Adolescents who can self-regulate are usually able to control the way in which they respond to their feelings and are in a stronger position to cope with stressful situations.²¹ Planning and problem-solving are important skills for day-to-day decision-making, for example, resolving how to finish an assignment on the same weekend as a sports tournament. Like the skills adolescents developed when they were little, these skills require opportunities to practice, and mistakes are likely along the way.

- ¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010
- ² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010
- ³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010
- ⁴ Dahl & Suleiman, 2017
- ⁵ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010
- ⁶ Shonkoff, 2012
- ⁷ Shonkoff, 2012
- ⁸ Dahl & Suleiman, 2017
- ⁹ Fuhrmann et al., 2015
- ¹⁰ Raposa et al., 2014
- ¹¹ Shonkoff, 2012
- ¹² National Scientific Council, 2010
- ¹³ Fuhrmann et al., 2015
- ¹⁴ Raposa et al., 2014
- ¹⁵ Raposa et al., 2014
- ¹⁶ Grazioplene et al., 2012
- ¹⁷ Grazioplene et al., 2012
- ¹⁸ National Scientific Council, 2010
- ¹⁹ Beier et al., 2000, cited by Collins, 2010
- ²⁰ Center on the Developing Child, 2016
- ²¹ Center on the Developing Child, 2016



These supports are all protective factors. While each protective factor can make a difference, the biggest changes are likely to happen when a combination of protective factors are put in place. In the same way that the number of risks add up to increase the chance of poor outcomes, reducing risks and increasing protective factors can improve outcomes. Those who've been affected the most by early adversity may also be the ones who respond the best when they feel well supported

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This article is based on material written by Brainwave Trust for the Parenting Resource, which was developed by the Ministry of Social Development, Family Services team <http://www.parentingresource.nz/>



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