Beyond words: research findings on bodily-focused early interventions for foster children with preverbal trauma

Ethically approved by Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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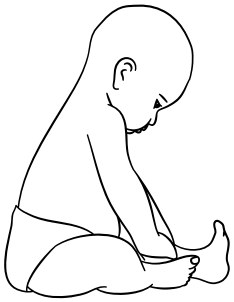
1 Background

Preverbal Trauma stored in the body



Decades of research (neurobiology, neuroscience, psychoanalysis) show **it is stored in the body — as sensation and motor pattern**, not narrative — held in **implicit** memory in the right brain.

Preverbal trauma (conception – age 3) was once largely overlooked because young children were believed unable to experience or remember pain.

Preverbal trauma **disrupts core attachment,** showing up as hypervigilance, withdrawal, and dysregulation

2 Australian Foster Care Context

Grounded in **the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, adapted into Australian federal/state law

Children in foster care (2023-2024)

46,000

~ **3%** of all children aged 0-17

Children with child-protection contact

179,000

1 in 31 Australian children (under 18: 2023-24)

Children enter care for complex, overlapping reasons — abuse, neglect, family violence, parental substance use or mental illness

3 Preverbal Trauma

How it's remembered — in the body, not words

- Bion first argued trauma is held in the body, not the mind
- Memory splits into two systems: explicit (language, forms ~age 3–4) and **implicit (body-based, sensory, active from birth)**

The impact

- Schore's regulation theory: the right brain — which fosters social and emotional wellbeing — develops first, shaped by early attachment.
- Left unresolved, disruption here can progress to PTSD.

Interventions & the gap

- Children access preverbal trauma through reenactment and play, not conversation
- Body-based therapies (e.g. dance movement psychotherapy) remain under-researched specifically for children in foster care

4 RESEARCH THEME & METHODOLOGY

Theme: How foster caregivers experience building attachment with children who have had preverbal trauma — an **embodied** lens.

- **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis** (IPA) to explore caregivers' lived experience
- **8 foster caregivers** from **4** Australian states

A. Restoring child's rights

- Safety built through routine, boundaries, honest conversations
- Trauma shows as developmental delay, hypervigilance, somatic cues

"I think he knew that I understood him in a world that doesn't understand him... No ifs or buts." — Caregiver

B. Rebuilding attachment

- Attachment styles vary widely, including indiscriminate attachment
- Children often "parentified" beyond their age
- Separations hardest — past abrupt loss fuels lasting fear

"I could see just a little tear roll down her eye." — Caregiver

C. Meeting children's unmet needs

- Need for individual attention and a sense of being seen and heard
- Sensory needs — touch, water, movement — support regulation

"I know you're angry. I'm here if you want to cuddle...I would cuddle her like a baby, rock her a little bit, and she would calm down." — Caregiver

D. Play is crucial

- Play often needs to be explicitly taught
- Reveals inner world — nurturing and explosive play both surface
- Stories and fantasy are important to understanding preverbal trauma

"She picked up a doll and then she goes, 'I kill you.'" — Caregiver

E. Comprehensive support required for caregivers

- Caregivers feel powerless in system decisions
- No mental health funding without a disability diagnosis
- Caregivers burn out with little support; need a trauma-informed system

"You're fighting not people, you're fighting systems." — Caregiver

5 CONCLUSION

Healing preverbal trauma requires attachment, embodiment, and play as one integrated process.

- Trauma before language lives **in the body** — **attend to somatic cues**, not just behaviour, and **invest further in body- and movement-based therapies to address it**
- **Play** is both a developmental need and a window into a child's inner world
- Caregivers' consistent, attuned presence supports child's emotional wellbeing
- **Funded psychological support must be available** for all children in care, not only those with a disability diagnosis
- **A trauma-informed society** is essential to prevent re-traumatisation and intergenerational trauma

6 REFERENCES (Selected)

Full reference list available at movingcircle.au/research

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I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I work, move and create and pay my respects to their elders, past and present and extend my respects to other First Nations Peoples who are present today. I embrace and practise diversity in our society.

7 CONTACT

http://www.movingcircle.au

More details of this research project found --->