

Early Year Hub interviews Mine Conkbayir

Safeguarding and Child Protection, adverse childhood experiences



Mine Conkbayir
CONSULTANCY

Early Years Hub: Mine you're helping us to understand how knowledge of brain development and neuroscience can inform us as practitioners. We would like to explore a number of areas particularly when we consider safeguarding and child protection. Can you tell us how adverse childhood experiences shape brain development and emotional responses in childhood?

Mine Conkbayir: If gone unsupported - and in a timely manner, a child who has been subjected to ACE's, will suffer in terms of their health and wellbeing – not only in the short-term but throughout adulthood too. How might this manifest? Well, if a child's brain and body are signalling to her that she is in danger (where in fact, there is no actual sign of danger), her physiology and cognitive abilities will be immediately compromised, as her brain and body will have entered flight or fight mode. So, 'unnecessary' functions like thinking before she acts, controlling her social behaviour and concentrating on her learning will be diminished. This is because the brain and body of a child who has been subjected to ACE's is wired for stress. In line with this, survivors of ACE's tend to have higher baseline cortisol levels which results in hyper-arousal. Over time, continued elevated cortisol levels can weaken the activity of the immune system, resulting in persistent ill-health.

Broadly speaking, a survivor of ACE's will mainly operate from their downstairs brain (this is the more primitive and emotionally reactive part of the brain), as opposed to their upstairs brain (responsible for all those skills we bunch together under the term 'school readiness' – a term I dislike!). Executive functions like delaying gratification, choosing what to focus on and what to ignore, problem-solving, learning and managing 'big' emotions like fear and anger reside in the upstairs brain.

Early Years Hub: What does a developing brain need?

Mine Conkbayir: It will seem deceptively simply but here are just a few neuroprotective factors needed to ensure healthy building and strengthening of synaptic connectivity in those important early years:

- Healthy pregnancy
- Secure attachment
- Absence of toxic stress
- Abundant social interaction
- Co-regulation
- High-quality pre-school provision
- Stimulating experiences
- Regular physical activity
- Optimum nutrition

Upon reading this non-exhaustive list, ask yourself, do you know the attachment history of the children with whom you work? How was mum's pregnancy? Was she depressed? Did she have support? Is home a safe place?

Early Years Hub

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Early Years Hub: What de-rails healthy brain development?

Mine Conkbayir: I think we need to acknowledge the short and long term impact of ACE's – these being:

- Abuse (sexual, emotional and physical)
- Neglect
- Dysfunctional home environment
- Domestic abuse (or domestic violence)
- Parental mental health issues
- Parental substance misuse
- Parental separation/divorce
- Parental imprisonment

Think of all you had or did not have access to emotionally, as a child. A child who is devoid of nurturing and responsive relationships may develop a perception of a world that is cold and uncaring. They will also find it difficult to self-regulate their emotional responses to the trials and tribulations of life, struggling with school and later - work and relationships. Where children do not have a safe and nurturing experience, I believe it is our responsibility to help nurture their self-regulation and their unique ability to thrive.

Early Years Hub: How important is the quality of early care for children who have experienced trauma?

Mine Conkbayir: In my opinion, it is life-saving. Nurseries and schools are a safe haven, a sanctuary for children who live in chaotic or abusive homes. The adults, their key persons and the experiences provided in that setting can go a long way in supporting the child to self-regulate their emotional responses, to build a positive self-image and social skills through the relationships and activities and relationships provided.

But – this requires an understanding of early brain development and the neuroscience of ACE's. Until this is provided as standard across early years qualifications and training, I fear that we will miss this opportunity to reach the thousands of children who are survivors of ACE's – because the current priority is testing and labelling of children and this must stop. I want to end this interview with a quote from the world-renowned trauma expert, Bessel Van Der Kolk. He tells us:

The greatest hope for traumatised, abused and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world. They can teach children how their bodies and brains work and how they can understand and deal with their emotions. Schools can play a significant role in instilling the resilience necessary to deal with the traumas of neighbourhoods or families. Van der Kolk (2014: 351)

About **Mine Conkbayir:** Mine is an award-winning author and lecturer. She has worked in the field of early childhood education for over 17 years and is currently undertaking her PhD in early education and neuroscience to further her work in this challenging and complex subject of brain development. Mine is the author of the award-winning *Early Childhood and Neuroscience: Theory, Research and implications for practice*. (Bloomsbury 2017)

Mine's on-line Cache Endorsed Learning Programme '*Applying Neuroscience to Early Intervention*' is available to purchase from her website www.mineconkbayir.co.uk

Early Years Hub provides training to the early years' sector and schools. We are pleased to be working alongside of our colleague Mine Conkbayir to deliver *neuroscience informed training* on a number of themed courses.

Early Years Hub have a range of training and support services for early years and schools including Ofsted Inspection Audits and HR and Legal services. For more details, please visit their website www.earlyyearshub.co.uk

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