
Childhood trauma 'not a life sentence'

EXCLUSIVE

ANGELICA SNOWDEN

Children in some NSW foster care homes are “severely traumatised” after experiences of neglect and abuse they lived through from age one, stunting their academic achievement and hurting their ability to trust others.

New research by the Australian Childhood Foundation revealed the concerning trends experienced by 300 young people and their carers who received specialist trauma counselling funded by the NSW state government from December 2019.

Foundation chief Joe Tucci said the report demonstrated an urgent need to break the cycle of trauma and change the way children’s brains were “hard wired” if they experienced trauma.

“When the community looks at kids who are causing problems ... and if those kids have been involved in the child protection system, what we need to be seeing in them is not kids that are wilfully trying to break the law or annoy people,” Dr Tucci said.

“They have no choice in the way they are behaving. They are showing us they have experienced disruption to their development.

“We need to more fully appreciate as a community and as a system just how complex these kids’ backgrounds are.”

The report showed 97 per cent of children sampled experienced abuse and or neglect before they turned one and nearly 40 per cent were abused for more than five years continuously.

The majority (87 per cent) experienced serious physical abuse and said they were kicked,

punched or hit with an object. At least 98 per cent surveyed said they had experienced emotional and psychological abuse. The report revealed 68 per cent of children witnessed ongoing verbal conflict between their parents in their lifetime, 61 per cent had observed physical violence between their parents and 59 per cent experienced extreme neglect by their caregiver.

The research also reported 62 per cent of children surveyed said they were sexually abused. Further, a high proportion (72 per cent) reported they had lived in three to eight out-of-home placements before they entered into the OurSPACE specialist trauma counselling program. A smaller proportion (21 per cent) had lived in nine different homes.

As a result of abuse and moving from one home to another, Dr Tucci said children could experience educational and developmental setbacks and they could find it hard to trust other people as adults.

“If you are changing places and relationships, you can’t settle. You can’t learn about how to trust, can’t find comfort in relationships,” he said.

More than half the children surveyed reported they were “significantly” behind their peers, while just under half were not attending school at all.

But specialist programs such as the OurSPACE program for children under 18 — delivered across NSW and funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice — could help to prevent the cycle of trauma, Dr Tucci said. “I think kids lives can be changed and saved if we get in early enough,” he said. “The impact of trauma ... is not a life sentence.”
