

# Understanding EARLY TRAUMA



## Jack experiences early trauma

Jack's story helps us to understand how early psychological trauma can impact children and what we can do about it.



Without support, Jack's early experiences can have lasting and pervasive impacts on his development.

As a baby, Jack experiences domestic abuse and neglect. Jack does not have a secure, nurturing relationship with a parent or caregiver. Jack is left alone for prolonged periods. Often, no one responds when he is distressed or hungry. To Jack, this feels like he has been abandoned. Jack sees and hears violence and is spoken to in a frightening way. He does not feel there is anyone to keep him safe. He is fearful of the people he relies upon. As a result, Jack experiences prolonged periods of stress, called toxic stress. This impacts his developing brain and body.

Jack has not learned that he can trust adults. He may struggle to form positive relationships with other grown-ups, such as early years workers and teachers.

Jack's brain has adapted to have a heightened response to stress, so he is more likely to enter "fight, flight or freeze" mode. He is more likely to have strong emotional reactions to challenges. This may affect his ability to play with other children and make friends. He could be more disruptive at school and get into trouble as a result.

Jack's heightened response to stress may make him more likely to engage in risky behaviour, like substance misuse.

Jack's body is less resilient due to the impact of stress. He is more prone to long term health issues, like heart disease.

## HOW WE CAN HELP

We can help to protect babies like Jack from early trauma by taking action to tackle the adversity they face, and supporting the development of protective, secure relationships between babies and their parents or caregivers.

His lack of sensitive, responsive early interactions may have affected Jack's language development. His heightened stress response can affect his ability to concentrate and pay attention. This makes it harder for him to learn and achieve at school.

Jack's response to stress and difficulty with relationships may mean that it is more difficult for him to retain friends. As his social circle shrinks, so does the support around him. This is called social thinning.

## HOW WE CAN HELP

It is never too late to offer Jack therapeutic support to help him overcome the impact of his early trauma.

## HOW WE CAN HELP

We can help Jack as he is growing up by adopting a trauma-informed approach. This means being sensitive to the fact that Jack may have experienced trauma, and how this might present in his interactions with services. It also means being nurturing and relationships-focussed in interactions with Jack, and offering him support. By being trauma-informed we can help Jack to develop stronger relationships and navigate stressful situations.

Jack's story is not inevitable. We can prevent trauma and reduce its impact.

**TACKLING ADVERSITY**  
+ **SUPPORTING EARLY RELATIONSHIPS**  
= **HEALTHIER BRAINS + BETTER FUTURES**

  
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