

BEHIND THE BEHAVIOUR

**PROJECT
507**

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA RESPONSES

BEHAVIOUR AS A SOLUTION

When a young person acts out, shuts down, avoids, lashes out, or refuses to engage, it can feel like the behaviour is the problem. But in this training, we're asking you to pause and consider: What if the behaviour is actually a solution?

This shift changes everything. It reminds us that behaviour is communication. It is often the most accessible strategy a child or young person has to manage what's happening inside or around them. Especially for those who've experienced relational and developmental trauma, behaviour is not just a reaction, but a survival response. It reflects what they've learned they need to do to feel safe, to gain control, or to stay connected in environments that often don't feel safe at all.

If we only focus on controlling or stopping the behaviour, we risk missing what it's trying to tell us. We also risk reinforcing the very patterns the behaviour was developed to manage.

Instead, try asking:

- What is this behaviour protecting them from?
- What need is it meeting?
- What threat is their system responding to?

This doesn't mean we excuse harmful behaviour, but we stay curious about what it's doing for them. Because once we understand the function, we can help build safer, more effective ways to meet that need.

The question isn't "What's wrong with them?"

It's "What happened to them?"

And "What are they trying to solve?"

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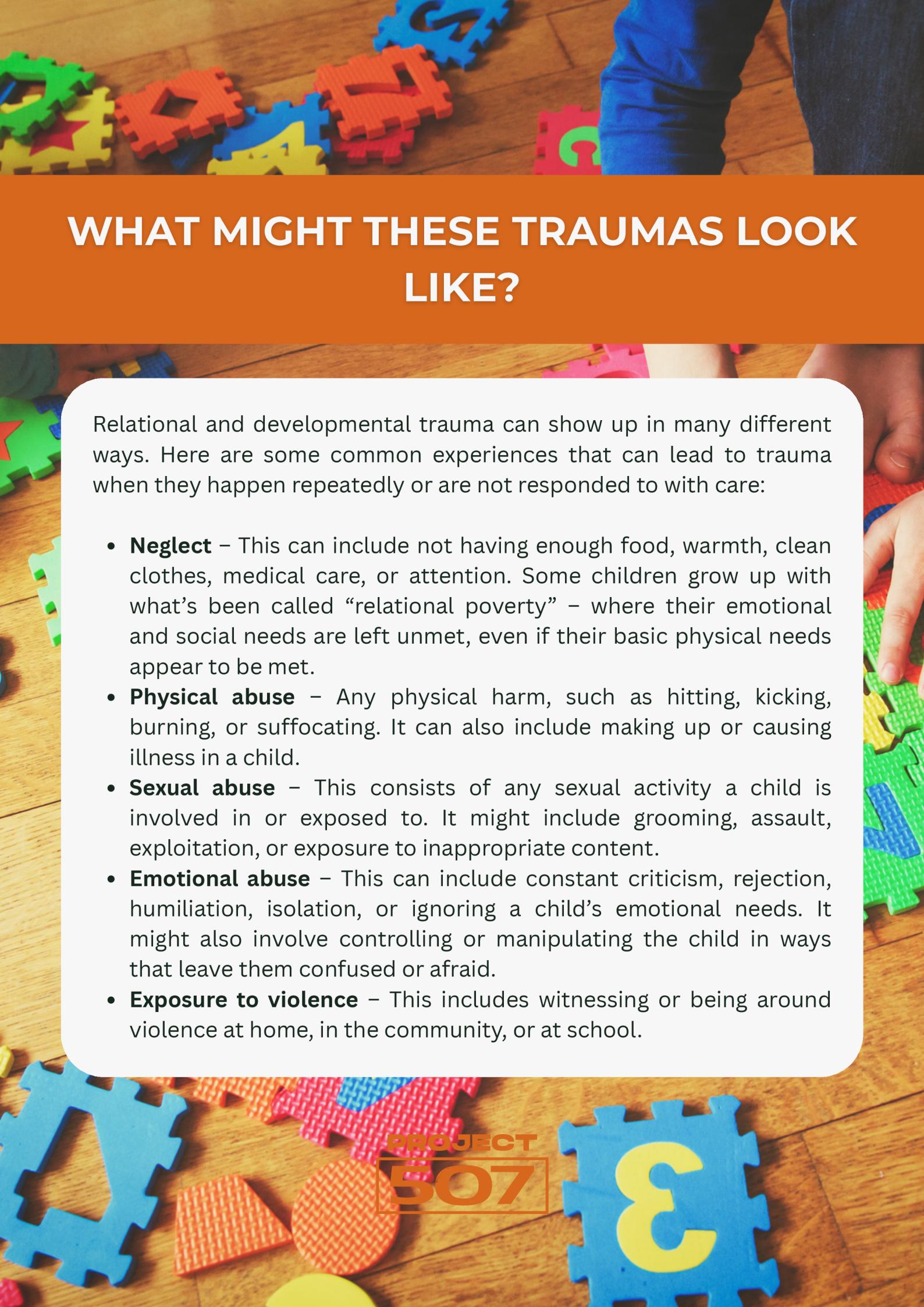
WHAT DO WE DO NOW

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA

When we talk about **relational or attachment trauma**, we're referring to the kinds of **harm** that happen in a **child's early relationships**, usually with the **people** who are **meant to care for them**. This might be a **parent, caregiver**, or other **family member**. It can include things like **not being comforted** when upset, being **ignored** or **rejected**, or experiencing **relationships** that are **unsafe, frightening, or unpredictable**.

Developmental trauma refers to trauma that happens while a **child is growing** and their **brain is still forming**. Because children's **brains are shaped by their environment**, these **early experiences**, especially when they're ongoing or repeated, can have a **profound impact** on how a child **develops emotionally, socially, physically, and neurologically**.

Children who have lived through **relational and developmental trauma** often **haven't just experienced** one difficult event. Instead, they've frequently lived through **layers of trauma**, sometimes beginning before they were even born. These traumas can **accumulate over time** and often **overlap**, making it more **challenging to identify** and **comprehend** what the child has experienced.



WHAT MIGHT THESE TRAUMAS LOOK LIKE?

Relational and developmental trauma can show up in many different ways. Here are some common experiences that can lead to trauma when they happen repeatedly or are not responded to with care:

- **Neglect** – This can include not having enough food, warmth, clean clothes, medical care, or attention. Some children grow up with what's been called "relational poverty" – where their emotional and social needs are left unmet, even if their basic physical needs appear to be met.
- **Physical abuse** – Any physical harm, such as hitting, kicking, burning, or suffocating. It can also include making up or causing illness in a child.
- **Sexual abuse** – This consists of any sexual activity a child is involved in or exposed to. It might include grooming, assault, exploitation, or exposure to inappropriate content.
- **Emotional abuse** – This can include constant criticism, rejection, humiliation, isolation, or ignoring a child's emotional needs. It might also involve controlling or manipulating the child in ways that leave them confused or afraid.
- **Exposure to violence** – This includes witnessing or being around violence at home, in the community, or at school.

WHY DO THESE EXPERIENCES AFFECT CHILDREN SO DEEPLY?

Trauma doesn't just affect the mind; it affects the whole body and brain. And children are especially vulnerable because their brains are still developing.

During childhood, the brain is like a sponge, soaking in everything from its environment. If that environment is scary, chaotic, or neglectful, the child's brain begins to adapt to survive. This often means they stay in a state of high alert, ready to react to danger, rather than feeling safe enough to rest, learn, or build healthy relationships.

For example, a child who has experienced trauma might:

- Find it hard to trust adults.
- Struggle to manage their emotions.
- React strongly to small triggers.
- Have difficulties with attention, memory, or problem-solving
- Avoid touch or certain sensations.
- Seem “shut down” or disconnected.

This doesn't mean there's something wrong with the child, it means they've adapted to survive in a world that hasn't felt safe.

WHAT SHAPES HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS A CHILD?

Not all children respond to trauma in the same way. Many things influence how deeply trauma impacts them, including:

- The child's age and stage of development
- Their temperament and nervous system
- How often the trauma happened, and how severe it was
- Who was involved (especially if it was a trusted adult)
- Whether anyone helped or responded with care
- Whether the child felt believed or supported
- Their wider environment: home, school, community, culture
- The presence of protective factors like a stable adult, routine, or safe space

Trauma also doesn't happen in isolation. It's shaped by wider systems like poverty, racism, and community violence. A child's story is never just about one moment; it's about what came before, what came after, and what support they did or didn't receive.

WHY “RELATIONAL” TRAUMA MATTERS

Sometimes, trauma isn't just about what happened; it's about who it happened with.

When the person who is supposed to keep a child safe is the one who causes harm or fails to respond, it can leave profound wounds. These kinds of wounds are often called attachment trauma or relational trauma. They affect how a child sees themselves, others, and the world.

Relational trauma can also shape how someone relates to their own thoughts, feelings, and body. It can pass across generations, especially when caregivers haven't had the chance to heal from their own experiences. These aren't just individual problems; they're rooted in social, historical, and systemic harm.

FINAL THOUGHT

Relational and developmental trauma isn't always easy to spot. It doesn't always look dramatic from the outside. However, its effects can be seen in how a child behaves, how they connect (or fail to connect), and how they cope. Understanding the impact of early relationships helps us see the behaviour not as the problem but as a communication of a deeper story.