

Children's experiences of trauma-focused treatment after being subjected to family violence

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Children who have experienced violence and abuse are more likely to develop physical and mental health problems. Exposure within the attachment relationship appears to be particularly damaging and can cause lifelong problems with attachment security and the regulation of affect and behaviour.

Trauma-focused treatment is helpful for many, but not all children benefit from it. In seeking to understand what makes treatment effective, the perspective of affected children is an important source of information.

Consequently, the aim of this study was to explore how children subjected to family violence described their experiences of treatment. Seventeen children and adolescents were interviewed 4-5 years after treatment. The analysis resulted in five themes; It was confusing, I need to feel listened to, I was still afraid, It was painful and I was the agent.

Throughout the interviews, relational aspects were highlighted as important. The focus on abuse and violence had been painful and a prerequisite for undergoing treatment had been a therapist who was perceived as empathetic, patient and genuinely interested.

Another aspect was the motivation of the children, who portrayed themselves as not being passive recipients in their encounters with health care, but rather as agents with agendas of their own. They had only engaged in therapy when they felt respected and treated as individuals, not as problems to be solved. Treatment settings characterised by patience, curiosity and playfulness, regardless of treatment methods, seem to be important. Possibly even more so for children with experiences of family violence, which may have impacted on their confidence in adults.

Many children had continued to experience violence and abuse during treatment. This points to the importance of not assuming that children are protected - regularly asking about exposure to abuse and creating safety plans should be part of standard practice.