

# The Manifestations and Correlates of Dissociation amongst Looked-After Children in Middle Childhood.

Holly Martin, Saul Hillman, Richard Cross and Katharine Anderson.

This paper explores the presence and role of dissociation in primary school-aged (4-11 years) looked-after children in placement at Five Rivers Child Care.



Dissociation involves experiencing disconnection. Dissociation can consist of:

- Disconnection from one's surroundings
- Experiencing a sense of detachment or isolation from oneself
- A shift in consciousness, altering one's sense of self wherein memory, perception and identity can be affected.

At a lower level, dissociation can include daydreaming, "zoning out", or lapses in concentration. At the other end of the spectrum, dissociation can assist the mind when it is coping with too much stress by blocking out traumatic experiences. Knowledge of dissociation can help unlock understanding of some of the complex difficulties LAC present with.

## Trauma and Dissociation

Although not all traumatised individuals develop dissociative symptoms, research has found a link between childhood physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and the experience of dissociation. Additionally, factors such as an unstable family environment, disrupted interpersonal relationships and multiple placement moves may increase the likelihood of experiencing dissociation. Studies have also explored the link between separation from siblings and dissociation, with the likelihood of dissociation being higher among those isolated from their brothers or sisters.

**In this piece of research, dissociation was measured in two ways:**

- In part one of the study the Child Dissociative Checklist (CDC) was used. The CDC is a 20-item questionnaire which asks carers to reflect upon the behavioural presentation of their child. The carer is asked to rate the behaviours as not true, somewhat true, or very true of the child.
- In part two, a smaller cohort of children were selected to complete the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP), a semi-structured, play-based assessment tool used to investigate a child's attachment-related representations in a non-intrusive way through storytelling. Children were told the 'stem' of a story, the scripted beginning, and were asked to complete the narrative, by playing and sharing verbally.

"Training can be provided to support carers to understand dissociation, which can support them, the child, and the placement stability."

## Results

91 caregivers completed the CDC as part of the annual assessment process. 41 children scored 12 or above on the CDC, indicating dissociative traits and experiences.

Out of the children who completed the SSAP, those who scored highly on the CDC shared stories which were less likely to portray adults in their stories as affectionate, comforting, helpful, or limit-setting. Positive representations were less present, and children demonstrated more traits associated with attachment insecurity.

## Findings

- Children who experienced maltreatment were at higher risk of dissociation.
- The consistency of relationships may safeguard against dissociative symptoms.
- Those in singleton placements showed more symptoms of dissociation than those in sibling placements.
- Experiences of sexual abuse were associated with higher levels of dissociation.
- Children with high levels of dissociation were less likely to portray adults in their stories as affectionate, helpful or limit-setting.

## How are the findings helpful?

- Being aware of dissociation can support a deeper understanding of a child's presentation and can buffer against misdiagnosis of conditions such as ADHD or Autism.
- Identifying dissociative traits can encourage integrative thinking around how to support the child in placement.
- Training can be provided to support carers to understand dissociation, which can support them, the child, and the placement stability.



To read the full paper, please scan the QR Code.

For more information about Assessment and Therapy please contact [katharine.anderson@five-rivers.org](mailto:katharine.anderson@five-rivers.org)