

Mile in My Shoes: Amanda's story

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I'm Amanda and I work as an educational psychologist. Currently I'm a specialist working with children looked after by the local authority. They're either living with foster carers, and some of them will be living in residential homes, children's homes and semi-independent placements when they're 16-plus. So that's my specialism that I've been working in for the last eight years.

A lot of the referrals that I have come under the description of social, emotional and mental health. In primary schools, quite often children are referred to me because the schools are finding it difficult to manage behaviour. So very, very young children, they might start to be quite aggressive to other children, defiant and maybe find it difficult to be in the classroom. Things that are destructing their own learning and the learning of other children.

When it comes to teenagers, the school are usually crying out for help really because they're concerned that they can't keep that young person in school. But the underlying need, because children that we're working with are all in care, is that there is always a trauma basis to their behaviour. The work is about trying to understand what that behaviour is communicating.

For a child, when they experience trauma, this is an actual brain and body experience. The trauma that a child experiences in the first month of their life can still be having an impact on them for the rest of their life. And that trauma might have been experienced before the child has even been born.

If prenatally there is domestic violence, for example, domestic abuse, before the baby is born, they're already picking up on sounds in their environment and cortisol within the mother is having an impact on the development of their brain. Which is making them primed to sense danger. It's a bit like walking through a field, if you walk through a field in the same direction enough times then you create this pathway. And that's what happens in children's brains. So that if they respond to a frightening experience enough times that creates a response that happens more easily.

So, if the child's in an environment where they are sensing danger, then they can become very vigilant, very hypervigilant to noticing what happens just before those danger situations. So, what happens in someone's face, what happens in someone's body, the sounds, the smells. The brain actually adapts to that. And it's an adaptive response so that that child can actually keep themselves - and sometimes someone else - safe within that environment.

So, the children that I'm working with who are within the care system have often experienced those sorts of traumas from before they were born, within the early months, years of their life. These are situations that happen because parents are not able to manage

their own emotional or mental health, their drug and alcohol addiction. When a child then enters a classroom, and they meet a lovely reception teacher who wants to, you know, engage with them, and they've been primed to react to dangerous situations - what one child might see as being a sort of friendly gesture from another child or from an adult, that child whose experienced trauma, their brain and their body is picking up on danger cues in that environment that most people aren't even picking up on.

I can be quite obsessive in my work that I will sort of try and look for a solution. And I guess some people get a bit ground down by the fact that there aren't always obvious positive outcomes. Sometimes things will seep through when things are particularly difficult. You can't work in the sort of area that I work in if you're gonna carry that with you all the time, 24 hours a day, you couldn't do it. So yeah. So, I swim in the Lido outdoor swimming pool and it's open all year. And I swim through the winter when I'm not working. That's my big thing that I do.

I just found that swimming in the cold, especially when you've got a blue sky, it just gives you that – *exhales* – sort of feeling that you can't really get from anything else. I think one year I was having a sort of stressful time and that's why I kept going. For me, I'll get in. I go into my – down to my knees. And then I'll go up to my waist. And I think my head is just completely clear at that point because I'm focusing on just getting into the water. I can think of lots of times where I've been pushed and challenged and needed to go for a swim in cold water. I'd say those are the more frequent days.

Recently there was... a little boy that I worked with where I've been involved for quite a long time, about two years, working really closely with foster carers and the school. And spent a lot of time with him as well. He was 6 years old. Things seemed to be really going well, and the school had really taken on board a lot of the thinking around working in a trauma-informed way with this child. And it seemed to be really positive.

And then something happened. The child went from going out one day into the community to do something quite fun, to not being able to go back home to those foster carers that he'd been living with for several years. No goodbyes. No planning, no preparation. And all of the adults around him, the social workers, the school and you know, myself, didn't know where he was going to be that next day because there was nowhere for him to be, nowhere for him to go. I knew the child really well. I knew the carers really well. I knew how invested everybody was in this child and we'd felt like there was real hope because it was, it seemed like it was going positively. You know for this child just to go from feeling like he was in a home environment to suddenly – yet again, because this had already happened in his life once – feeling abandoned, rejected. So yeah, I felt anger about the situation, and it just makes you feel really, really sad.

Unfortunately, it happens a lot that children are in a foster care placement and then suddenly they're standing with their bags somewhere in the local authority because they don't have anywhere to go. It happens. I remember that I was just so pleased that I wasn't the social worker that was having to find somewhere for this child to go and that I actually

could walk away at the end of the day, and go for a cold swim, and try and sort of process that information or maybe just block it out for a while, because it was just so awful.

When I first get in the water, I take a deep breath and then do a long outbreath when I first go into the water. The long outbreaths are what are really good for regulating your nervous system. So, I think that's one of the things that really works, and you have to focus then on your breathing – *inhales* – steadily, in that first length while you're really, really cold. You go to another place in my mind and then it's just focusing on your body and so you're not thinking at all. It's great and that's for me it's quite good because there's not many times that my head's not thinking about something. Yeah, I do have sort of a quite whirring brain.

The outcome that we're really aiming for with the children that we work with and the young people we work for, is inclusion. For them to be able to stay within that school, be included within that school, make progress emotionally, socially as well as academically. And be productive and safe. But at the moment, in schools there's a real emphasis in terms of wanting children to behave in a certain way. A very behavioural approach that means, in psychological terms, if you see a behaviour that you don't want to happen, you punish. Which absolutely doesn't work, especially if you're working with children who have experienced trauma whose behaviours are happening because they are survival responses to an environment which has been dangerous to them. So, the child or young person isn't necessarily in control of what they're doing.

At the moment, punishment, sanctions, exclusions are increasing in order to maintain a level of control within the classroom. There's a whole group of children and young people who are being excluded from education because their behaviour's been understood in a way that is not helpful.

With secondary-age children, what feels like over the last few years – a sort of parallel world that people don't necessarily seem to be aware of – children within the care system are going missing for long periods. Being involved in drugs, county lines. Unfortunately, the way it works with exploitation within the community, are there are people who are very skilled at noticing the children and young people who don't have a sense of belonging within a school. And so they will use that as a way to bring them into whatever it is that they are exploiting them to be part of. So, my work is about trying to support the network of professionals to try and get them back into school.

What we have at the moment is we have a rising level of need and decreasing level of budget within school. So, schools are really struggling to meet the needs of children and because there's not enough educational psychologists, there's a backlog. Which is why local authorities are buying in at massive expense locum educational psychologists to try and do that work. Sometimes what happens is that it's such a long wait for that process to take place that the school can get to the point where they're saying, 'We just can't meet the needs of this child.'

Those children may then move to a more specialist setting. The money that can be charged for that is, you know, they're phenomenal amounts of money, and it seems like it's out of

control. Local authorities are sort of being bled dry financially really because they have to respond to a need, sometimes quite quickly, and these businesses are there to offer something which local authorities need to use. That money should be invested within the local authority to meet the needs of their children. You know, something really significant needs to happen to change that.

Even though I might get frustrated by the structures and the system that I work with, I will try and challenge, to try and get the best outcome for a child or a young person that I'm working with. That drive doesn't really get any less to try and make a difference and try and sort of make things better. I'm always really keen just to be Amanda, and to be myself as much as possible. I think bringing your sort of self to the job is important because children that I work with are very astute and they can absolutely tell if someone's not being genuine. That's part of their survival responses.

One of the things that means I've stayed in my job for so long is I've always really wanted to go out looking for those children and young people who need the support the most. Somebody who is there advocating for them. I think that's always one of the things that's always driven me, trying to go out and seek out children who might have maybe slipped through the net otherwise.