

Supporting each other during the holiday season

The holiday season is often seen as a time of joy and celebration. However, for children and young people in care, it can bring unique challenges and stressors, especially those with a trauma background. As the year ends, calendars fill with Christmas activities, social connections, and the loss of routine provided by school and after-school programs. During this period, children and young people may require extra support, understanding, and patience to help them navigate emotions and memories tied to previous holiday experiences, along with anxiety over what this Christmas might bring.

As Martha J. Holden emphasised, *"We need to help each child or young person to have a great day."* The CARE Team around the child or young person must ensure that both their physical and emotional needs are met, creating opportunities for positive human connections and experiences that can make each day great.

Jim Anglin, in the foreword of the revised CARE Manual, also highlighted, *"Every moment counts, and every interaction is an opportunity for positive human connection, for learning, for feeling seen, heard, and valued, and perhaps for joy. And we never know which moments will be transformative."*

Common Stressors During the Holiday Season

Here are some stressors that children and young people in care may face as we approach the holiday season:

- Loss of routine and structure
- Memories of previous Christmas
- Not seeing family
- Difficulties around family time
- Feelings of obligation to other siblings
- Sensory overload from holiday stimuli
- Meeting new people or being placed in unfamiliar situations
- Managing Christmas commitments
- Feeling disconnected from their biological family or foster Families
- Observing stress in adults

Pain-based Behaviours

These stressors can manifest in various pain-based behaviours such as:

- Running away
- Withdrawing or avoiding involvement
- Hyperactive or hypoactive behaviour
- Sabotaging positive experiences
- Meltdowns/tantrums/rages
- Being clingy and fearful
- Difficulty in listening and following instructions
- Bed-wetting
- Changes around eating and sleeping patterns

Responding to Attachment-seeking behaviours

These behaviours often signal a need for attachment and connection. When children and young people display such behaviours, they are reaching out to form a bond with their carers. It's important to focus on understanding the underlying reasons for these behaviours rather than reacting to the behaviours themselves.

As Holden states, **“Giving attention and support when children are struggling or anxious strengthens connections and helps children see that adults are on their side”** (Holden, p. 90).

By consistently responding with empathy and support, carers can help children view adults as allies who are there to assist rather than react negatively to their attachment-seeking behaviours.

Fostering Attachments

To foster attachments and developmental relationships with children and young people, it is essential to ensure that our interactions are characterised by the following qualities:

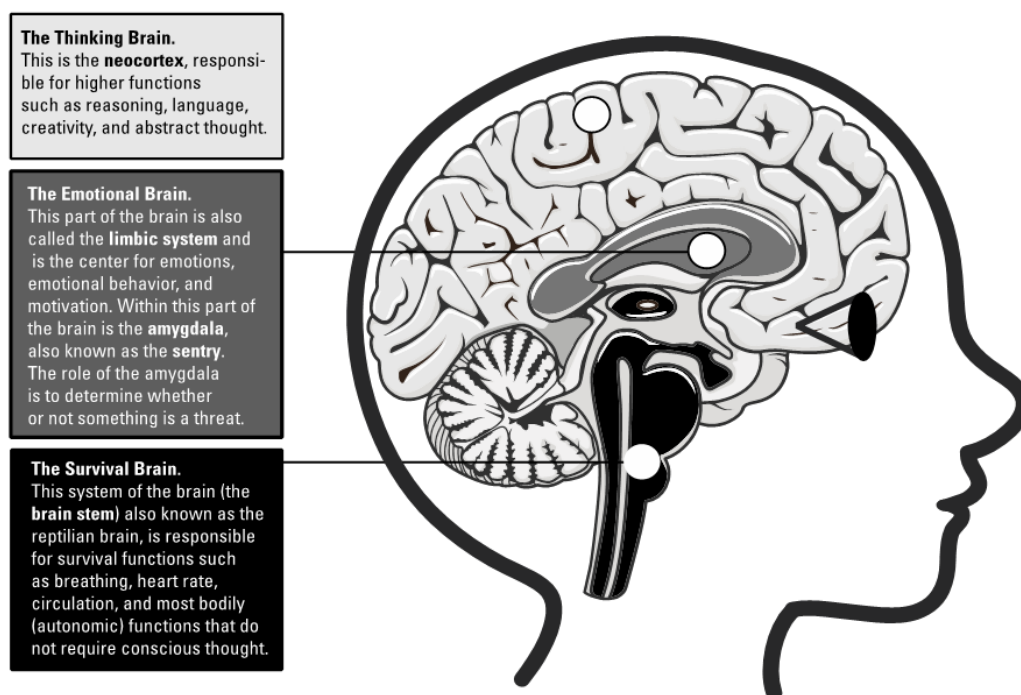
1. **Available:** Actively engage in the child's daily life so they can trust that you will be available and ready to help whenever needed. Being present and involved builds trust, showing the child they can rely on you for support.
2. **Sensitive:** Be attuned to the child's unique needs and how they communicate them. Sensitivity means recognising and responding to the child's emotional and physical needs in a way that strengthens your connection. Reflect on how you can be more aware of the child's needs and their preferred ways of communicating to build a stronger bond.

3. **Acceptance:** Accept children for who they are, including their behaviours and expressions of need. Understanding that attachment-seeking behaviours are ways for a child to seek inclusion and belonging is crucial. It's about choosing your battles wisely, overlooking some inappropriate behaviours, and communicating unconditional acceptance, encouraging the child to try again and form positive attachments.
4. **Invest:** Help the child or young person celebrate their successes and accomplishments. When you, as a carer, show confidence in their abilities and potential, it fosters a greater sense of self-worth and confidence in the child. Investing in their growth means actively supporting their development and acknowledging their progress, no matter how small.

By embodying these qualities, *being available, sensitive, accepting, and investing in their growth*, you create a nurturing environment that encourages secure attachments and positive developmental relationships.

The Triune Brain and Trauma Response

Children and young people who have experienced trauma and adversity, particularly when these experiences involve a caregiver or trusted adult, often have an emotional brain that remains on high alert and in a state of hypervigilance. The **Triune Brain Model**, proposed by neuroscientist Paul MacLean, describes three fundamental brain regions involved in processing: the survival brain, the emotional brain, and the thinking brain.



Trauma and the Emotional Brain

For children and young people who have faced trauma, their emotional brain often remains on high alert. Even when there is no immediate threat, any reminder or memory—whether conscious or unconscious—of a past traumatic event can send signals of danger, triggering a stress response. A simple smell, sound, or visual cue stored in the emotional brain can evoke intense emotional reactions that may seem disproportionate to the situation.

In these moments, it is crucial for adults to respond therapeutically, recognizing that these behaviours often signal an underlying need that is not being met. Rather than focusing solely on the behaviour, carers should seek to understand the root cause and provide a sense of safety and connection.

Navigating the Holiday Season

While the holiday season can indeed be a time of heightened stress for children and young people with a trauma background, it also presents valuable opportunities to build connections and learn more about them, their families, and their cultural traditions.

Regardless of whether a child will eventually return to live with their biological family, maintaining and fostering these connections is essential, as the family remains an integral part of their identity. This includes respecting the child's family, customs, traditions, and culture, and ensuring all communication with the child and their family is done respectfully.

Supporting the child or young person in navigating feelings of separation and loss, especially during the holiday season, can serve as an opportunity for building attachment. This involves:

- **Acknowledging and Validating Feelings:** Allow the child to express their emotions and validate their experiences without judgment.
- **Creating Opportunities for Connection:** Learn about their family's customs and traditions, and incorporate these into holiday celebrations where possible.
- **Fostering Respectful Communication:** Speak positively and respectfully about their biological family, regardless of personal beliefs or opinions.
- **Providing Emotional Support:** Be present, patient, and empathetic, helping them navigate the complexities of separation and loss.

By approaching these challenges with empathy and understanding, adults can transform potentially difficult moments into meaningful opportunities for connection, healing, and attachment-building

Tips and Resources

Here are some helpful tips and resources to support children and young people in care during the holiday season:

1. Start discussions well in advance

- a. What has the child or young person's experience been previously?
- b. Do they have any expectations?
- c. What are your family traditions around Christmas time? How did they come about?
- d. What is the child or young person's family traditions? How did they come about?
- e. What does Christmas day look like for them? What does it look like for you?
- f. How can we incorporate the young person's traditions and culture into your Christmas day activities? How do we navigate any differences?

2. Self-care:

The holidays can be stressful for everyone, so make sure to take time for yourself, use your support network where possible and do something you enjoy doing. By doing this, you are giving the child or young person the best version of you. So, look after yourself, use your experience, and your relationship with the child and young person and be attuned to them.

3. Family time:

If it is safe to do so, give the child or young person the opportunity to be involved in activities in the lead-up to Christmas. This can include:

- a. Creating gifts or cards for their birth family
- b. Attending local community events

4. Emotions:

The Australian Childhood Foundation offers insights into how children in care experience the holiday season. [Read more here.](#)

5. Be prepared for when things don't go to plan:

Don't put pressure on Christmas day or any of the activities the child or young person might be involved in the lead-up to Christmas. It is important to be patient and attuned to the child or young person. Even if they have been in care for some time, be prepared just in case things don't go to plan. Be ready to support the child or young person through their struggles, emotions and feelings of being overwhelmed. It is a very busy time of the year, and we need to lower our expectations if the child or young person is struggling to meet them.

6. CARE/TCI Strategies:

There are a range of CARE and TCI strategies that can be utilised with children and young people to support them through stress and tension. For additional information on the appropriate strategies to use in your situation please contact your caseworker

- 7. Christmas resource tools:** Provide a Santa letter template for the child or young person to complete in the lead up to Christmas. This resource is a tool to gain insight as to what the child or young person would like to happen at Christmas and what is important to them.
- 8. Activities to build inclusion and attachment:** This could be involving the child in your own family traditions:
- a. Helping to decorate the Christmas tree
 - b. Having their own special ornament for the tree
 - c. Having an advent calendar to count the days down until Christmas
 - d. Cooking in preparation for Christmas
 - e. Matching pj's
 - f. Create your own new traditions
 - g. Involving children and young people in decisions is also important, as feelings of having no control may fester into pain-based behaviours
- 9. Will Santa find me?** If your child is new to care, they may be worried about whether Santa will be able to find them, whether they are returning home or being moved to another placement.
- a. Make sure you work with your child's CARE Team to figure out where they will be at Christmas. Make sure you don't answer any questions without confirmation.
 - b. Try to visit Santa and confirm with him where the child will be at Christmas
 - c. Make or purchase a sign for the front of your house so that Santa knows where to visit
 - d. Write a letter to Santa
 - e. Use "Elf on the Shelf" to reassure the child that Santa knows where they will be

10. Christmas crisis care:

It is important that people in crisis have somewhere to turn over the Christmas and New Year break. These organisations will continue to offer 24-hour phone support and counselling for those needing assistance:

- Mental Health Line - 1800 011 511
- Lifeline - 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue - 1300 22 4636
- Hospital emergency departments will continue operating as normal.

Challenge On-Call Service

At Challenge Community Services, we understand that caring for children and young people is a round-the-clock responsibility. To ensure you have the support you need, we provide access to emergency assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

We have an on-call phone number available to help you manage emergency situations outside of business hours. This service is operated by dedicated Caseworkers and Managers in your region.

Please Note:

The Challenge on-call service is not a substitute for emergency services. In situations requiring an immediate response from Police, Ambulance, or Fire services, please call **000**.

Reminder:

Make sure you are familiar with the on-call number for your region.

At Challenge Community Services, we would like to wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Safe New Year.

Reference

Holden, M.J. (2023) 'Children and Residential Experiences (CARE) Creating conditions for Change'. Child Welfare League of America.