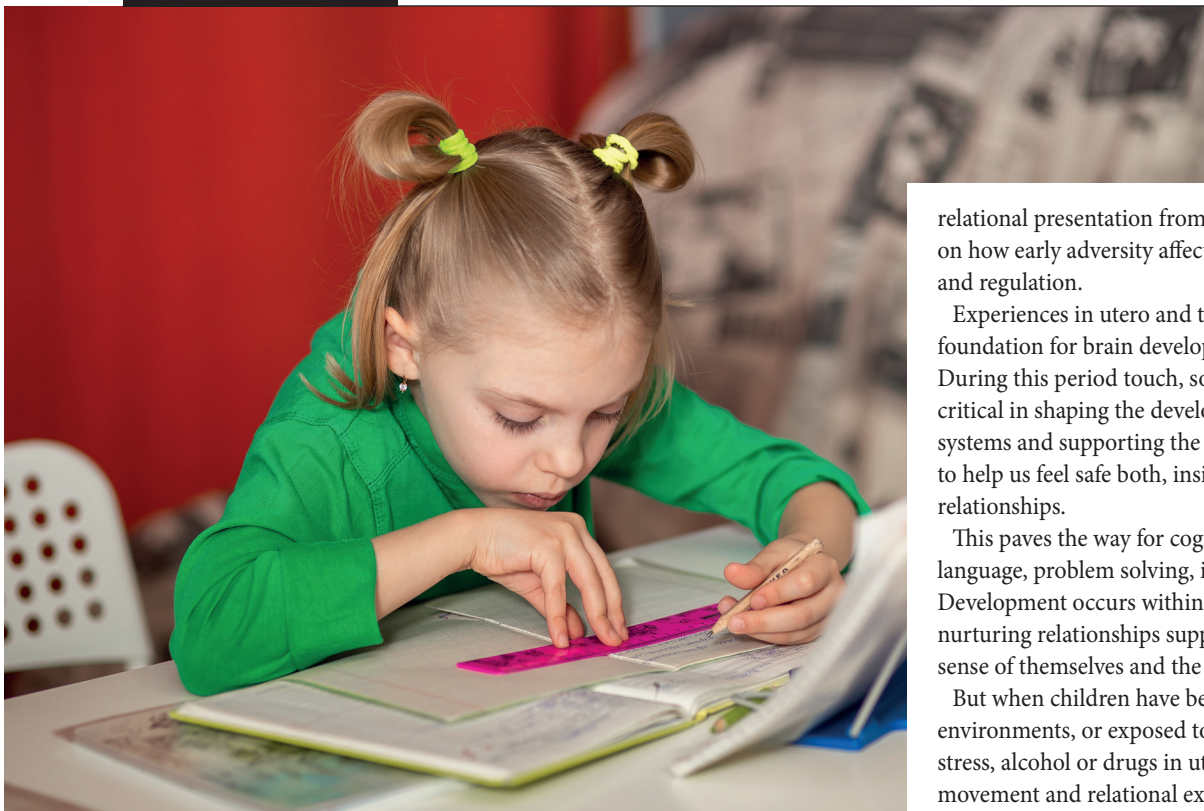


IN FOCUS



The **impact** of **early adversity** on **bodily regulation**

Jo Robinson and Jenna Broome on how understanding disrupted development of the sensorimotor systems can help social workers in assessments

As you read this, think about how much attention you had to pay to your body in relation to the task.

Did you have to think about how you sat down? How much force you used to open your laptop? How you located your mouth to have a drink as you read?

Hopefully, you didn't have to think too hard about any of this, and that's because you have an established foundation of bodily regulation. This allows your body to get on with the task of moving around and doing what you need, without having to pay much conscious attention to it.

As social workers, we don't often think about how good bodily regulation develops, and what happens when this process is disrupted.

There is a wealth of research into how developmental trauma impacts a child's emotional, psychological and

relational presentation from conception, but much less focus on how early adversity affects a child's bodily development and regulation.

Experiences in utero and the early months of life lay the foundation for brain development and bodily regulation. During this period touch, sound, smell and movement are critical in shaping the development of our sensorimotor systems and supporting the process of forming connections to help us feel safe both, inside our bodies and within our relationships.

This paves the way for cognitive growth such as language, problem solving, impulse control and learning. Development occurs within the context of safe, attuned, nurturing relationships supporting the newborn to make sense of themselves and the world around them.

But when children have been in frightening or neglectful environments, or exposed to high levels of maternal stress, alcohol or drugs in utero, they don't have the touch, movement and relational experiences their brain and central nervous system need to develop good bodily regulation.

This can manifest in a range of ways, such as not knowing how much pressure and force to use to give a hug, not having the stability from our core to sit upright on our bottom to write, constantly bumping into things or tripping over thin air.

Someone may struggle to filter information from outside their body and be startled by noise, bothered by the texture of clothing or someone lightly brushing past them.

When bodily regulation has been disrupted, it makes it harder for families to successfully engage with other interventions, such as therapeutic parenting.

The good news is it's not too late. Even if the process of developing good bodily regulation did not occur at the right stages, with the right support our brains are able to fill in the gaps in our sensorimotor systems.

A model we use to help with this is called BUSS®. Created by occupational and play therapist Sarah Lloyd, it focuses on replicating early patterns of movement that have been missed in a child or young person's development.

Through relationships and play, it helps the brain shift from a place of survival to one of thriving.

Being more curious about how a child is progressing through their developmental milestones and the ways in which they experience movement, touch and nurture from their caregivers can help social workers when they are assessing families. It could offer a more holistic way of making sense of a child's experiences where there are safeguarding concerns.

In our current roles, we work collaboratively with children and their parents or carers to assess the child's foundation sensorimotor systems and then play fun games that replicate typical patterns of movement that were missed in their early life.

It's such a privilege to support families to heal and connect relationally, enabling their child to reach their full potential.

PSW

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Find out more at www.bussmodel.org