

A Trauma Informed Approach to Christmas

During the Christmas period some children and young people can feel anxious and vulnerable, as well as excited. This will particularly apply to our vulnerable students including those who are spending Christmas away from their families. For some children Christmas may be a very lonely time, with very few presents or even none. Some children will experience Christmas as a time when adults are anxious, drinking more heavily and short of money. Christmas can also be a time when family arguments and instances of domestic violence increase. For those children in care who have experienced neglect and abuse it can be difficult to let go of unhappy memories and 'get into the Christmas spirit.'

They may be very aware of the excitement of their school friends on Christmas Day. This could make Christmas time a sad and miserable time, highlighting how different their birth family is compared to other families. If a child is living at home and experiencing neglect, they may only be looking forward to the start of the New Year, eager to get back to their friends and a familiar routine, or just wanting to have a hot meal every lunchtime. When a child is in foster care, it can feel overwhelming to be surrounded by so much food and drink, to be meeting relatives of the foster family — aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents... and more! A foster child may feel quite shy or anxious about meeting so many new people, all of whom seem to know each other so well!

The excitement and expectations surrounding these special events can build weeks and months in advance, leading to unexpected and unwanted reactions. If needing to control the environment is important for the child, they may become very unsettled by the plans for a celebration, the disruption to their routine and the possibility of surprises. Any special occasion that emphasises family times can cause conflict for a child who does not live with their birth family. They may have memories of Christmases that went wrong in the past or find it difficult to manage conflicting loyalties with their current parents or carers and their previous ones.

As celebrations approach, parents or carers of traumatised children will often find themselves managing difficult situations at home that can then spill over into school. Celebrations can also mean disruption to the usual school routine. Many schools will provide Christmas themed activities during class time, concert's, shows and nativity performances, fundraising and fun day events linked to the season including decorations in classrooms and corridors. Even if little reference is made in school it will be on TV, in the media, in shops and everywhere else for weeks in advance and the timing of Christmas at the end of the autumn term means that it coincides with the run up to a school holiday which can be unsettling in itself.

Christmas can be a challenging and tiring time for adults as well as children. It can raise uncomfortable emotions, and stress of Christmas shopping, preparing for the day itself, and managing lots of extra activities in school can weigh heavily on adults

in school. It is important for teachers and school staff to manage their own stress and emotional responses around Christmas, as well as being aware of children's responses.

Here are a few things to consider during the Christmas period:

1. Be mindful in the run-up to Christmas

A good starting point is to be mindful of difficulties in the lead up to Christmas and consider how they could be affecting students. If distressed behaviour increases or engagement reduces, it is important to remain curious. In school children may respond to expectations and changes around Christmas by increasing anxious and clingy behaviour, responding more emotionally to incidents than usual, refusing to participate in activities, and sabotaging celebratory events perhaps as a way to avoid participating in them. Some children might be able to voice their feelings about Christmas, but for others it will come out in the behaviour.

2. Positive relationships

Maintain positive/key worker relationships and allow plenty of time for talking and support. It may be that you need to adjust your expectations for time in lessons. De-escalation and positive behaviour management is key; it could be going for a walk, time out in a quiet room or engaging in art or music as an outlet. It can be helpful to plan alternative activities for children who are struggling and allow access to calm down zones. When 'wind down' activities are planned ensure that children who struggle with this have a selection of alternative structured activities available to them

3. Tailor content

RSE sessions could include topics such as managing stress and anxiety over Christmas and/or strategies to cope with social situations. Speak to the class as Christmas approaches acknowledging that this can be a stressful time. This gives permission for children to share difficult feelings and may allow you to identify children who are likely to struggle. Acknowledge the difficulty that big transitions can bring and assure the child you're aware of their big feelings and are there to support them

4. Prioritise support

Additional opportunities for parents/carers and students to share concerns may also be of benefit. Opportunities to be listened to and contained will be a great support to young people and parents/carers. For our most vulnerable students it can be of benefit to ensure they are provided with information on support for when you are not there over Christmas, such as [Childline](#) and [Shout](#).

Be aware that if a child is talking incessantly about Christmas this might signify anxiety about the event more than excitement.

5. Mind your language

Avoid asking questions such as "What do you want for Christmas?" – be aware that for some families money may be tight. When your students return from the Christmas break avoid questions such as "How was your Christmas?" and replace with "It's lovely to see you, welcome back." Many children may not want to think about their Christmas if it has been a stressful and/or difficult time and may also feel the need to provide a version of events that is similar to that of their peers.

6. Routine and consistency

Children thrive on structure and routine and maintaining some of this will help children to cope. Provide visual timetables showing any changes to the routine, including rehearsals for shows, or special activities planned for the class. Be very clear about what will happen on celebration days and avoid surprises. Maintain procedural routines as far as possible, such as routines around the start and end of the day, lunchtime and taking the register.

7. Transitional objects

Allow the child to take home a transitional object from school for the holiday, for example class teddy bear, book from library, classroom game they like to play. This reassures them that they will be coming back.

8. Maintaining contact

It can be beneficial for Key Adults to try to maintain some indirect contact during the holiday period where possible. Even a short postcard saying that you are looking forward to seeing the child again at the start of the new term can reassure the child they are held in mind and their safe base is still there for them.

9. Preparing for return

Be prepared for some regression at the start of the new term. A child may revisit separation anxiety behaviours that were thought to be long overcome, for instance, and extra support may be required for the first days or weeks.

Written by Dr Adele Thacker for Staffordshire Virtual School December 2021