

**The Institute of Integrated Systemic Therapy**  
**Research Paper Summary**

**Author name and Job Role:**

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**Paper title:**

Relationships as an Agent for Change for Abused and Traumatized Children in Care

**General area/topic:**

This review builds on the messages from the literature and offers the suggestion that there is an opportunity for the relationship between the child in care and the care giver to be a therapeutic tool as an agent for change.

**Main research questions/ aims:**

The aim of this study was focused on relationships for children in care. Relationships children in care form have been well documented, this study aimed to build on the importance of relationships and how damage caused by relationships can most effectively be healed by relationships.

The objectives of this research were as follows –

1. How does relational abuse and trauma in childhood affect the capacity for children to form future relationships?
2. Can early abuse and trauma be treated through the engagement, unconscious communication and exchanges in the relationships?
3. What can be understood about abuse, trauma and attachments for children in care?

4. What impact does relational abuse and trauma have on outcomes for children?

**Why this topic was explored/ what is the intended impact:**

As a review of the literature this study questions whether the relationships between children in care and adults who care for them, may be understood as an aspect of the therapeutic treatment and if the engagement and exchanges within the relationships could be understood to act as an agent for change.

The intended impact of this study was to understand the current research in the area of relationships as an agent for change with traumatised children in care. This would then inform the understanding of this area which could contribute to training in the organisation and act as a springboard for further research into the area of therapeutic communities.

**Methods:**

A Systematic Literature Review was undertaken; the search of published articles and journals was conducted.

The identified journals and papers were analysed via a thematic analysis.

**Main findings:**

From a Thematic analysis of the journals, five key themes emerged: Relationships, Attachment, Outcomes, Complex Trauma and Psychosocial functioning.

*Relationships:* Relationships with care givers has the potential to change negative patterns of relationships the child in care has come to know. However, boundary issues between the child and carer would need to be considered in the light of the complexities regarding safeguarding. Support for staff i.e. reflective practice groups – supervision – training for carer's working with children in care, was a consistent message from the literature. Within this support, a focus on what exists in the space in between the child and the carer could aid the understanding of the relationship as a therapeutic tool and agent for change.

In terms of children in care and relationships, a different view needs to be taken of the function of the relationship.



The stability of placements underpins the ability to form healthy attachments, experience correctional relationships and impacts on outcomes.

*Outcomes:* There was a correlation between the quality of the relationships with the carer and the outcomes for children in care.

*Trauma:* Relationships can be understood to be intrinsic to the treatment of the childhood trauma and an aspect of the healing for the child. By understanding and noticing what happens within the relationship at an unconscious level between the child and the care giver, it may be possible to become an agent for change.

The importance of the attunement and mindedness of the carer for children in care is a key feature from the literature.

It is important to identify the relational trauma for children in care as an aspect of the treatment plan and understanding of how this is present in the relationships between the carer and child in care.