

Book Review

Emond, R., Steckley, L. and Roesch-Marsh, A. (2016). A guide to therapeutic child care: what you need to know to create a healing home. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 239pp, ISBN 9781849054010, £15.99.

Corresponding author:

Joanna McCreadie, Chief Executive of Seamab, a **Children's Charity** providing care and education for vulnerable children with complex needs

Many years ago I read, and tried to absorb, the thinking and approaches in *The Other 23 Hours*, which discussed the development of a caring and therapeutic milieu for children. Since this was published in 1969 there have been great advances in our understanding of the impact of trauma on children, and in our knowledge of what helps these children recover. However, the same critical challenge has continued: what can we do to help children who have experienced trauma and loss?

A Guide to Therapeutic Child Care: What You Need to Know to Create a Healing Home goes some way to addressing this critical – and complex – challenge which faces everyone attempting to help children who have experienced trauma. **Having worked as a practitioner and a manager in children's** community and residential settings, I was impressed by the breadth and depth of this new book from the writing team of Ruth Edmond, Laura Steckley and Autumn Roesch-Marsh. **All three authors' previous work has** provided a strong focus on the real experiences of children in care, and the book continues with this theme.

The book allows the reader to move comfortably through theory, research evidence, case studies, reflection and engagement in the work with their children. The twelve chapters cover a wide range of relevant areas and importantly include sections on human development, healing and containing, touch, and working with pain based behaviour. It is clear the authors have given a great deal of thought to the language they use. This is seen especially in their use of **the phrases 'your' and 'your child'**. **This emphasises the importance of** relationships for children, helps the reader keep their child in mind and ensures the discussions and information feel relevant. Throughout there is a warmth of tone which places children front and centre.

The authors open the book with their key message: **'everyday experiences shape children's sense of themselves and...such everyday experiences hold enormous therapeutic potential'** (p.7). The authors successfully argue that it is in day to

day experience of relationships that children will make their best recovery from trauma, and develop their potential. There is a sense of the joy and celebration intrinsic to successful adult- child relationships and encouragement of positive ways of engaging with children which will actively help them.

Each chapter of the book is carefully structured to include sections on practice using case studies; prompts for reflection; ideas for practical strategies that can be tried to help children; and further reading and resources. This helps create a very readable and accessible book for a range of different people in different roles.

The book opens with a helpful chapter on "The Developing Person". Here, childhood development is understood in the context of life long development, emphasising the shared experiences of the child and their adult supporter. The processes of human development, and how this is influenced by experience, are thoughtfully discussed. The reader is encouraged to understand their child as having missed vital aspects of the development process, rather than as a child who is damaged or difficult. This helps adults understand that appropriate help will include finding ways in which the child can complete missed parts of the human development process.

Subsequent chapters explore key topics. Particularly useful here are the chapters on "Tuning in" and "Attunement and Relationships as a Source of Recovery". Both of these tackle issues of fundamental importance in helping children recover from trauma – without attunement and relationships it will be even more challenging to support a process of recovery.

The whole book benefits from having a pragmatic approach, emphasising what can be done in the day to day experience of living with **your child**. **'Sharing a common rhythm can help bring people together and facilitate tuning in and attunement. So, for example, dancing together, singing together, playing catch or even walking together at a similar pace all give children a direct and immediate experience of reciprocity, engagement and connectedness, and they are also fun'** (p. 57).

Beginning with approaches to understanding development and moving through key topics, the authors challenge some of our current orthodoxies in caring for **traumatised children. For example, children's personal stories are often approached as a task, and part of a professional accounting for a child's life.** Chronologies – which may or may not be accessible for children and shared with families – are written and **repeated frequently. The child's story may be perceived as a chronology, rather than as an experience and a personal history. Exploring the child's story can also be seen as a professional task, to be completed, rather than a developing part of the child's identity.** The proposal in this book is that helping children with their stories is 'about making the past an

everyday event, rather than approaching it as specific 'work' to be undertaken' (p. 107); As such 'their past is a living thing that can be brought into the present at any time' (p. 109). In healthy families, personal and shared stories are a part of everyday life. The authors encourage all of us in our roles to achieve this for our children who have experienced trauma as well.

To extend the work of the authors, I would be interested in further developing the outlined practical strategies, as well as the thinking on how all adult helpers can be supported in helping children through therapeutic child care approaches. This might include thinking about the management and leadership of organisations, specifically residential child care and education, where some of our children are living and thriving.

In any context, efforts to help traumatised children can feel like a high risk attempt to manage a maelstrom. Sometimes that maelstrom is pending – sometimes it actually arrives. But the sense of it, sometimes just beyond reach, is always there. *A Guide to Therapeutic Child Care* is a helpful map of how the concerned helper can intervene, in a positive and structured way. In this the authors have achieved their aim of supporting helpers to address the challenges of caring for children in an alternative home.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)