Exploring the impact of work-related stress and professional wellbeing with practitioners in homes for children

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Exploring work-related stress and professional wellbeing

- Practitioners working in homes for cared for children experience emotionally demanding work, including exposure to distress, trauma and complex relational needs.
- Work-related stress and burnout may affect practitioners' psychological wellbeing, their ability to sustain supportive relationships and the quality and consistency of care provided to children.
- Personal experiences and histories may influence how practitioners respond to children's distress, potentially offering both strengths and additional emotional challenges.

Why staff wellbeing matters for children

- Individual coping strategies, including self-compassion, may influence how practitioners can manage work-related stress.
- Workplace factors, including team relationships, management support, supervision and organisational pressures, may contribute to or alleviate stress.
- There is a need to better understand the factors associated with burnout and professional wellbeing to inform more effective support for the residential childcare workforce.
- Our study therefore explored the relationships between work-related stress, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, coping and self-compassion, alongside practitioners' experiences of the challenges and restorative aspects of their work.

What did we do?

Participants: 144 UK-based practitioners working in homes for children, recruited through social media and professional networks.

Data collection: Anonymous online questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics, informed by stakeholder consultation and previous research.

1. Professional quality of life, including compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary traumatic stress
2. Secondary traumatic stress
3. Self-compassion
4. Adverse childhood experiences
5. Coping strategies, using the COPE Inventory

Qualitative data: Four open-ended questions explored practitioners' professional experiences, including challenging and restorative aspects of their work.

Quantitative analysis: Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple regression analyses examined relationships between wellbeing outcomes and potential risk and protective factors.

Qualitative analysis: Inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach, identified patterns across practitioners' written responses.

What did we find?

Approach-oriented coping was associated with lower burnout.

- Self-compassion was associated with lower levels of burnout.
- Self-care was recognised as important.
- Supportive relationships with colleagues and managers could help practitioners manage stress and feel restored.

Poor communication and organisational pressures could exacerbate difficulties.

- Secondary traumatic stress was strongly associated with burnout among practitioners working in homes for children.
- Avoidant coping was associated with higher burnout.
- Practitioners described difficulties prioritising self-care alongside the emotional demands of their work.

- Personal experiences and histories could be both a resource for empathy and understanding and a source of additional emotional vulnerability.
- Burnout cannot be understood solely as an individual issue; the findings highlight the importance of workplace relationships, supervision and organisational conditions.
- Overall, the findings support the need for multilevel approaches to staff wellbeing, combining individual support with organisational changes that enable practitioners to provide consistent, relational care.

What did practitioners tell us?

- *‘[my] experience of a loving stable home as a child helps in the separation process of child and behaviour during difficult times’.*
- *‘experiences of adversity help me empathise and balance needs for positive risk taking and independence’*
- *It is difficult to keep a boundaries and easy to cross a line between professional and personal life. The majority of the days I take my work to home and it makes an impact on my personal life, relationships and my own well-being. It is an area which I still need to learn.*
- *‘separating home and work can be hard, especially after a challenging shift’*
- *‘accept that you are not a robot and that this can have an impact’.*
- *‘I am aware that the lack of the care for myself might lead me to burning out’*
- *‘I do not look after myself much I centre myself around my work and others’.*

What could better support look like?

- Reflective supervision: Regular, psychologically informed spaces to process emotionally demanding experiences and reflect on relationships with children.
- Supportive team relationships: Open communication, trust, shared responsibility and opportunities to learn from colleagues.
- Trauma-responsive leadership: Managers who recognise the emotional impact of the work, respond with empathy and model psychologically safe practice.

What could better support look like?

- Training and development: Preparation for the relational and emotional demands of residential childcare, including understanding trauma and its impact.
- Organisational commitment to wellbeing: Policies, resources and working conditions that make staff wellbeing a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden.
- Recognition of personal experiences: Safe, non-judgemental spaces to consider how practitioners' own experiences may inform their work, without making assumptions or requiring personal disclosure.
- Consistent, relational care for children: Working environments that support staff continuity, emotional availability and trusting relationships with children.

So what?

Caring for the workforce is part of caring for children

- **Relationships matter:** Practitioners need the emotional capacity, support and consistency to build safe, trusting relationships with children.
- **Trauma-responsive care starts with understanding:** Recognising the impact of trauma on children also means recognising the emotional demands placed on the people caring for them.
- **Wellbeing is a shared responsibility:** Individual coping and self-compassion matter, but so do reflective supervision, supportive teams and organisational cultures that enable staff to thrive.
- **Better support enables better care:** Investing in practitioners' wellbeing is an essential part of creating stable, compassionate and responsive environments for children.

What needs to change in our teams, services and organisations to ensure that practitioners feel supported enough to provide the relational, trauma-responsive care that children need?

Multi-Layered Trauma Informed Care

Staff often draw on their own experiences of care, and of hardship, to inform how they care for children. Participants also highlighted how the work can evoke difficult memories and emotions, identifying a need for whole-organisation trauma-responsive care

Trauma-responsive principles should influence:

- Leadership
- Policy
- Workforce development
- Supervision
- Organisational culture



Building Reflective Practice Into Everyday Work

Staff described taking work home, struggling to process emotions, and finding opportunities for reflection and restorative action

INDIVIDUAL	TEAM	ORGANISATION
• Acknowledge personal triggers and reflect on when and how these show up. • End-of-shift reflections and hand-over. • Reflective journalling to process impact of the work. • Reflections and de-briefing after incidents.	• Monthly reflective practice groups • Facilitated reflections and de-briefing after incidents • Group formulation and intervention planning	• Time for reflective practice built into staff rota • Supervision that purposefully addresses individual challenges and successes. • Regular, informal drop-ins and psychological support

Prioritising Compassion in Practice

Self-compassion emerged as one of the strongest protective factors against burnout and secondary traumatic stress, and compassion satisfaction increases with approach coping strategies.

TOWARDS SELF	TOWARDS OTHERS	FROM THE ORGANISATION
• Replace self-criticism with compassionate self-talk • Recognise limits of responsibility • Accept difficult emotions as part of the work • Actively engage with self-compassion practices • Seek and engage with sources of support when things feel difficult.	• Peer support systems. • Regular wellbeing check-ins. • Strength-based and compassion-focused approaches with children and peers • Recognise and challenge perfectionism, criticism, and unrealistic expectations.	• Training in compassion- and strength-based approaches • Space and resources for emotional processing • Compassionate/ Relational leadership • Clear and accessible routes to employee support • Employee recognition

Supportive Leadership & Reflective Supervision

Our findings demonstrated the importance of strategies and supportive frameworks that enhance attachment security, foster vulnerability and provide emotional containment.

INDIVIDUAL	TEAM	ORGANISATION
• Using reflections to inform personal and professional development • Identifying when and how supervision can be used to support wellbeing • Self-compassion and approach coping should inform support-seeking	• Open peer-to-peer communication and feedback processes • Mutual support between colleagues • Regular informal check-ins • Recognition of individual strengths and triumphs • Emotional responsiveness during difficult shifts	• Access to regular supervision • Reflective leadership training • Trauma-informed management development • Measuring what matters (e.g. staff wellbeing, burnout indicators, supervision quality)

Cultivating wellbeing through connection

Staff shared ideas for maintain a sense of connection and belonging, which is essential for individual wellbeing and resilience.



A 'family portrait' wall – new staff add a photo taken with funny filters to break the ice.
Photos to capture fond memories.

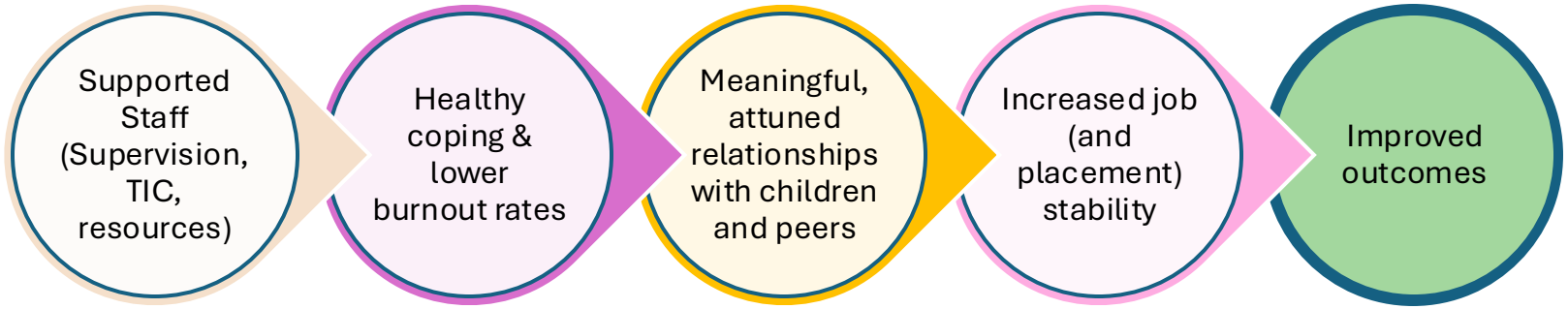
Psychologist contributes a photo to show they are a part of the home, reaffirms normalisation about seeking psychological support.
Sending gifts to colleagues when they are away from work to show they are being held in people's thoughts.

Dressing up for a 'red carpet' party
A welcome box for new carers - includes slippers, blue light card, personalised pen and notepad, and a bedding set.
New starters asked how they would like to be supported in their role so managers can tailor their approach.

Key takeaway:

Children experience trauma-responsive care through relationships. The quality of those relationships depends on a workforce that feels safe, valued, connected and supported.

Caring for children and caring for the workforce are not separate goals.





NEST Study: Developing trauma-responsive care in children's homes



The aim: To develop and evaluate a collaborative, trauma-responsive framework that supports children's wellbeing through relationships, understanding and consistent care.

What we are doing

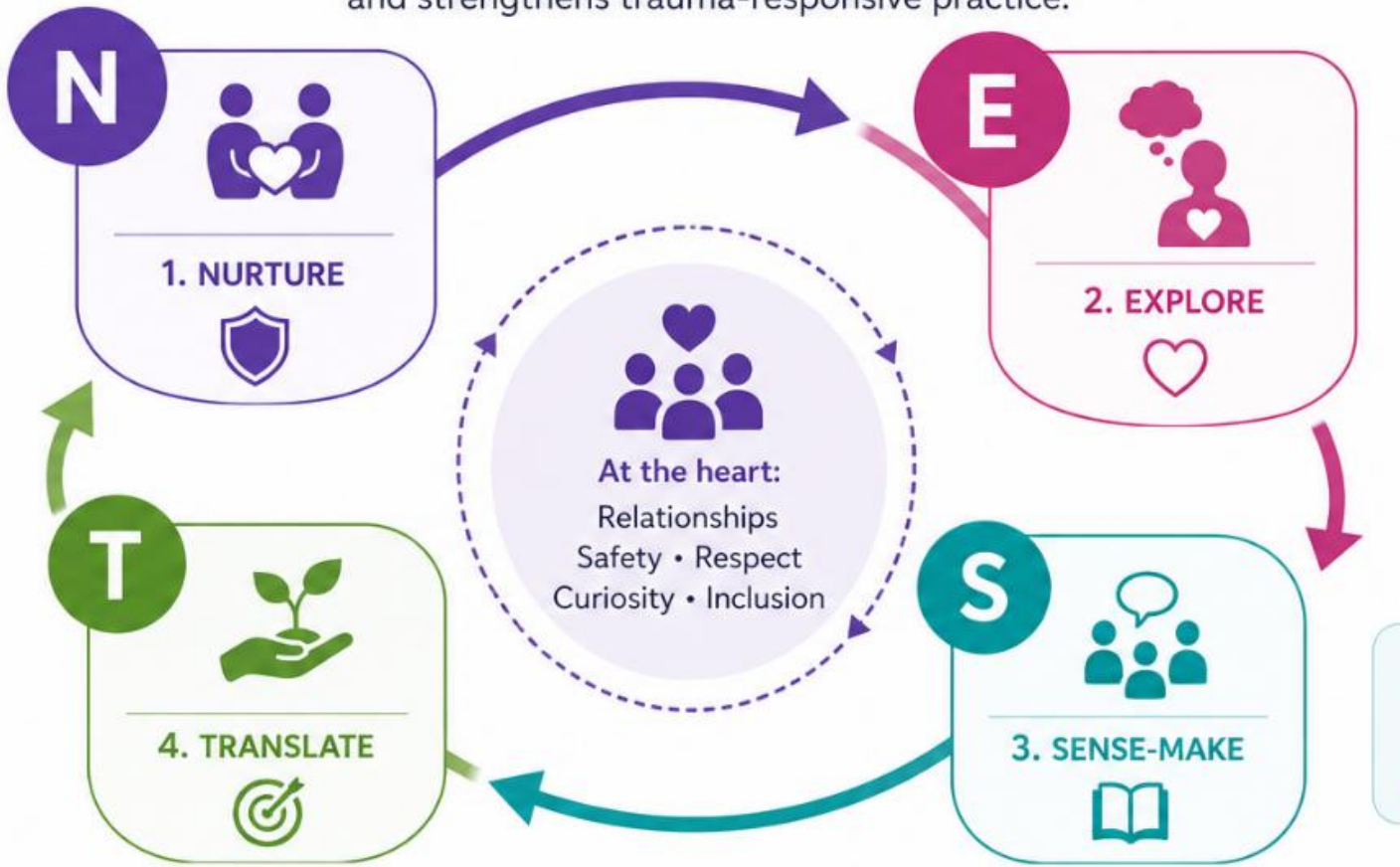
- Working alongside children, care staff, managers and partners to shape the NEST Framework.
- Supporting shared understanding of children's experiences, needs, strengths and relationships.
- Embedding collaborative trauma-responsive formulations, reflective supervision and relational approaches into everyday practice.
- Exploring how the framework can be implemented and sustained in children's homes.
- **Why it matters:** Creating environments where children feel safe, understood and supported, and where staff are equipped to provide consistent, compassionate care.

Funded by
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The NEST Study

NEST Trauma-Responsive Reflective Cycle

A continuous cycle of reflection that deepens understanding and strengthens trauma-responsive practice.



Review and renew throughout

Compassionate curiosity and non-judgement

Context shapes our understanding

THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

Settle & Connect → Share & Explore → Reflect & Sense-Make → Plan & Translate → Review & Return

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The NEST Study

NEST Trauma-Responsive Wellbeing Charter

Supporting the wellbeing of children, young people and the people who care for them

Wellbeing supports relationships. Relationships create change.

The NEST Trauma-Responsive Practice Framework recognises that the wellbeing of staff and children are interconnected. Staff who feel safe, valued, supported and emotionally contained are better able to provide the consistent, nurturing and therapeutic relationships that help children and young people thrive. The purpose of this charter is to create a shared commitment between organisations, leaders and staff to promote wellbeing, relational safety and trauma-responsive practice. This charter is grounded in relational practice, reflective cultures, psychological safety and shared responsibility.

Our Organisation Will

Create a Trauma-Responsive Culture

- Foster a nurturing, inclusive and psychologically safe environment where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.
- Promote a culture of curiosity, compassion and learning rather than blame.
- Recognise the impact of trauma, distress, loss and adversity on children, young people and staff.
- Prioritise relational safety, emotional wellbeing and belonging across the home.

Support Staff Wellbeing

- Recognise that staff wellbeing is essential to providing high-quality therapeutic care.
- Provide regular opportunities for reflective practice, supervision and peer support.
- Ensure staff have access to appropriate support following distressing incidents, challenging events or periods of increased pressure.
- Encourage open conversations about wellbeing, stress and emotional health.

Promote Reflective and Therapeutic Practice

- Provide protected time for reflection, learning and relationship-building.
- Support staff to think about the feelings, needs and experiences that may lie beneath behaviour.
- Encourage reflective decision-making rather than reactive responses.
- Value supervision as a space for support, growth and emotional processing.

Foster Positive Working Relationships

- Develop respectful, supportive and collaborative relationships between colleagues.
- Recognise and celebrate individual and team strengths.
- Promote shared problem-solving and mutual support.
- Encourage staff to seek help without fear of judgement.

Value Learning and Development

- View learning as an ongoing process and provide access to trauma-responsive training and development opportunities.
- Support peer learning, mentoring and the sharing of experience.
- Encourage staff to contribute ideas that improve care and wellbeing.

Include Children and Young People

- Listen to, involve and learn from children and young people.
- Support participation, choice and voice in decisions that affect them.
- Ensure services are responsive to their individual strengths, identities, needs and aspirations.

As Staff, We Will

Care for Ourselves and Each Other

- Recognise our own wellbeing needs and seek support when needed.
- Give ourselves the same compassion and care that we provide to others.
- Monitor our wellbeing following difficult experiences and communicate concerns promptly.
- Support colleagues with kindness, empathy and respect.

Work in a Trauma-Responsive Way

- Prioritise connection before correction.
- Seek to understand the meaning behind behaviour rather than focusing solely on its management.
- Promote emotional and relational safety for children, young people and colleagues.
- Support co-regulation and recognise that self-regulation develops through safe relationships.

Engage in Reflection and Learning

- Participate openly in reflective practice, supervision and learning opportunities.
- Be curious about our own responses and how they influence relationships.
- Learn from mistakes and challenges without blame.
- Contribute to a culture of continuous improvement.

Promote Healthy Relationships

- Listen actively and respectfully to others.
- Value different perspectives and experiences.
- Communicate honestly, constructively and compassionately.
- Contribute to a consistent, nurturing and therapeutic environment.

Our Shared NEST Commitment

Together, we commit to creating homes where children and young people feel safe, understood, valued and supported, and where staff experience belonging, wellbeing, professional pride and the opportunity to provide the best possible care through strong, therapeutic relationships.

The NEST Study

Definition of Trauma-responsive Practice in the unique context of children's homes

A trauma-responsive approach is a **whole system, relational, reflective and values driven approach**, based on individual participation and an organisational commitment to uphold trauma-responsive practice. A trauma-responsive approach in children's residential care supports **children, young people and the workforce to feel safe, connected to one another, and empowered**.

It aims to **reduce distress and enhance** wellbeing by **preventing harmful, crisis driven or reactive practices**. A trauma responsive approach promotes **stable, trusting relationships** that **enable healing and transformation in a nurturing environment for all**. A trauma-responsive approach embeds safe and transparent practices to enable people and organisations to continually **learn and develop**.

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