

Differential diagnosis: developmental disorder or the impact of developmental trauma?

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Level: Introductory / Intermediate

Clinicians often notice the similarities in presentation between children who have experienced maltreatment and had limited opportunities for attachment, and those with neurodevelopmental disorders like ADHD and autism. The nature of the brain, which remains highly plastic for much of early childhood, means that it is often difficult to distinguish the source of any impairment, so differential diagnosis takes knowledge of both conditions and a careful unpicking of the superficially similar presenting behaviours.

Both organic disorders and those that are acquired can run through the generations and across multiple members of the same family, due to being passed on through parenting experiences as well as through genetics. The study of epigenetics is beginning to shed light on these differentiations, whilst neuroscientists are exploring the biochemical and structural similarities and differences in the brains of children who have developmental disorders and those who have experienced neglect and abuse, and clinicians are developing more effective assessment and intervention techniques.

I hope in this workshop to give a whistle-stop tour of some of the issues and differentiating features that would be relevant to clinicians working with children and young people's mental health.