

THE SERIOUS VIOLENCE SUMMIT

A working theory
for Improvement

PHOENIX 
EDUCATION CONSULTANCY LIMITED

beginning with belonging



On Monday 1st April 2019, Sarah Dove, founder & CEO of Phoenix Education Consultancy was invited to attend the Serious Violence Summit at 10 Downing Street. In her capacity as president of PRUsAP she was invited to help answer some of the questions Damian Hinds and other experts have on the role education can and should play in the reduction of serious violence and crime. Our pre-meeting report was published [here](#)

This report details the thinking we believe must be utilised when defining a solution and is based on the opinions shared within Downing Street and across social media platforms since our participation in the event.

The reasons for the serious violence summit

Although many contributory factors have been on the rise for a number of years, yet with a sharp rise in knife crimes and tragic deaths as a result, the UK has declared a knife crime epidemic and called upon experts from a variety of industries to decide how we can address this problem and what steps we must take in moving forward. The summit was based around key areas that included law enforcement, education, communities, youth activities, public health and criminal justice.

A combination of correlations

Although the summit is very clearly focused on the outcomes it aims well, the government has done well to understand that the breadth and complexity of the problems that have caused them. There is no doubt that the solutions that come out of the serious violence summit must be multi-agency but to ensure they are effective in the long term we must understand the multi connected nature of the cause.

It is undeniable that there are many factors that connect to the rise in serious violence but is important to truly understand each of them to understand if they are causal correlations or not.

1. Poverty:

Approximately 1 in 5 people in the UK are living in poverty which impacts everything from their ability to stay warm through to their ability to eat regular or nutritionally balanced meals. Research shows that poverty is connected to a whole variety of negative outcomes from poorer physical and mental health through to lower achievement and reduction in opportunities. Yet, what does poverty mean for serious violence and how has it contributed to the situation we find ourselves in today?

Poverty puts more pressure on more parents to work, longer and harder, forcing them to be away from their children. Poverty causes children to develop without a sense of security, a belief in possibility or access to opportunities. It means they are competing for their parents attention which will be demanded by their financial hardship and they will learn that as individuals, they are in many ways defined by finances.

2. Work Life Balance:

Put simply, our working world is not designed for us to develop secure attachments with our children. Whether it's the pressure of a 9 'til 5 that never actually stops, being attached to our e-mails throughout the night or dragging ourselves completely away and fully back to work around the postpartum period is contributing to, through no real fault of parents, the production of children with attachment disorders. We are teaching our children that they should not trust or rely on others consistently. We are teaching them that they are not enough to command the attention of their primary care giver. We may be teaching them to be independent, self-reliant and emotionally silenced and can find ourselves failing to hear them, support them or take time to discover their secondary needs because we, as busy parents, have work to do. The competition for attention is extreme and if good behaviour is overlooked, negative behaviour becomes a coping mechanism. Attachment disorder isn't a condition of the poor but instead a by-product of the working class.

3. Domestic Abuse:

It is thought that 1 in 5 children are negatively affected by domestic abuse in the UK but it is not sufficient to simply blame the rise in domestic abuse for the rise in serious violence. It is important that we understand the cause of the rise in domestic abuse - understanding the pressures, difficulties and hardships males and females face in their relationships that lead to abusive behaviour. With at least 1 in 4 women experiencing domestic abuse during pregnancy it is important that we analyse how our current system of pre and postnatal care connect to these statistics.

4. Social Media

It is hard to consider any of the problems in our current society without considering the impact of social media and digital technologies. It is easy to blame the increased exposure to violence as a result of social media and gaming as the root cause of the rise in serious violence but alone is not efficient and neglects many of the more complicated components of our social age. Social media causes us to be permanently accessible, gives us an opportunity to compare our lives to that of others, experienced increased pressure to conform and increased frustration when we may not meet the expectations we have of ourselves and that of others. Social media is a permanent popularity contest and drives us to do, look, act and live in a way that creates immediate feedback from others. Assuming that this will always be positive is naive and cannot be overlooked in our understanding of serious violent crime. There are also significant issues relating to the use of social media to perpetuate, encourage and glorify violence against others.

5. Exclusions

There has been a steep rise in both primary and secondary school exclusions and suspected rises in off rolling and the use of inclusion booths due to increasing demands on both grades and behaviours of pupils. These changes in statistics coincide with a promise to make learning environments more inclusive and a promised commitment to prioritising the mental health of children and young people yet we still operate a hierarchical system based on offering the 'best' opportunities to the 'best' students and exclusions to the 'worst'. Our perception of the children

and young people that fail to conform to the rules and regulations of our education system is limiting their lives and starting the spiral of self-fulfilling prophecies that can easily result in serious violence and crime.

6. Mental Health

Mental health problems is thought to now affect 1 in 10 young people with dramatic increases in childhood depression, anxiety, self-harm and addiction. In addition to this, there is an increased prevalence of autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. We can hypothesise that many of these mental health issues have been caused by the development of insecure attachment which complex and wide spread symptoms but little currently available with regards to diagnostic clarity. We often are limited by our ability to offer reactive rather than proactive support in relation to youth mental health which results in a rise in unmanaged mental illness, the number of young people that experience mental health crisis and ultimately, an increase in youth suicide.

7. Crime

Gun and knife crime amongst young people rose by a shocking 14% last year. The same year saw 14,500 new entrants into the youth crime system and a steady increase in the prevalence of youth gangs. The risk of developing a drug addiction during our adolescent years is higher than ever and 56% of young people admit to bullying another online. Whilst our need for punishment of youth is increasing, the outcomes of youth imprisonment continue to decline with more and more people facing unemployment, poverty, mental illness and institutionalisation that leads to a lifetime of reoffending.

A problematic statement

Investing in the prevention of unwanted behaviours will simply cement the need for ongoing preventative measures. A solution lies in understanding the real causes of problems. By investing in solving their causes rather than responding to outcomes is where real change can happen.

Our understanding of causality

Although we are incredibly well versed in many of the correlations that exist between the key components of our society and the violent behaviour demonstrated by children and young people, our understanding of cause is limited and without finding clarity we will be unable to prevent the cycle of trauma, neglect and crime.

Our theory of causality is just that - a working theory that needs to be researched, validated and clarified but it is at least a starting point for a long term solution rather than a short term response to undesirable behaviour.

The Theory of Damaged Attachment:

When we think about attachment types, we analyse whether a child has established a secure attachment with their caregiver and focus on the initial months after birth, assuming that if a

baby's physical and emotional needs are met in this period, a secure attachment is successfully formed. We assume that once a secure attachment is formed, it will last and develop a blueprint for future healthy relationships with others and ones self.

The theory of damaged attachment is based on the notion that babies form secure attached with their primary caregivers which then become damaged, dysfunctional and maladaptive during a child's early years, creating new clusters of behaviours that don't wholly match the diagnostic criteria for detachment disorder or known mental health conditions.

The theory of damaged attachment is based on the following principles:

- We fuel a 'maternal' period in which mothers are extracted from all day to day responsibilities and pressures in order to efficiently and effectively care for their child and produce a secure and nurturing attachment with them.
- This period teaches children to be dependent on their primary care giver. To rely on them and trust them to meet their physical and emotional needs. They learn to expect the full attention of their primary caregiver and build the foundation of their relationship with them without distraction, pressure or stressors from outside influences.
- At the point at which a primary caregiver returns to work (because the rising cost of living and increased levels of poverty mean women are facing increased pressure to return to work), they often become physical and emotionally absent - facing challenges around fitting back into their workplace, succeeding in their career and managing a workload with the additional pressures of being a parent. Many parents are likely to become more attached to digital devices and preoccupied with work which today has no definite end point.
- The theory of damaged attachment hypothesises that it is sharp change in focus, presence and emotional wellness in a caregiver that causes damage to the secure attachment that has been developed.
- The theory of damaged attachment hypothesises that a secure attachment can be formed whilst both primary and secondary caregivers continue to balance careers, financial pressures, stressors and digital engagement but it is consistency that is key to ensuring children develop healthy relationships with themselves and others in the future.

The theory implies that the current notion of 'returning to work' after a period of total absence from the stressors and demands of the working world, leaves children wondering what they did wrong. Why they are no longer worthy of their, anxious around the sudden rise in stress and in competition with the sudden pressure parents will have to be 'on call' way beyond their working hours. We question what we teach a child when we teach them they are more important than anything for 9 months, but then will have to play second fiddle to e-mail because mummy has to prove to her manager that her brain hasn't gone to 'mush'.

Increasingly we are understanding the importance of inclusive approaches to learning and working and the many benefits people from gain when they are allowed to be their 'whole

selves'. Yet, we are letting our future generations start life with an exclusive relationship that simply cannot be sustained. We are bringing children into the world and essentially breaking them at a point we decide life must go back to 'normal' in order to pay the mortgage or feel 'fulfilled'.

Arguably the most important question with regards to the theory of damaged attachment is, 'what does causing damage to a secure attachment to our children about themselves and the world'. We believe the answer to this includes many characteristics we would associate with 'Generation Y' including a need for independence, self-sufficiency, immediate gratification and a lack of respect for hierarchy or discipline. A damaged attachment will ruin a child's self-esteem, eradicate their self-worth and make them feel they have to fit for competition and recognition either positively or negatively.

Solution Summary

Although there are many factors that can contribute to the existence of neurodiversity, individual differences and societal hierarchy, we are unable to explain the rise in youth violence and related factors like the dramatic increase in childhood mental health problems, unless we really understand what has changed in society to cause the unprecedented shift in behaviours.

Although it is easy to blame poverty, there have always been deprived pockets of our society - and in fact as a whole, our standards of living have dramatically improved. It is easy to blame an exposure to violence and abuse but again, there has always been violence in our society and in fact, today, individuals are more aware and protected of their human rights with relation to both physical and mental abuse than ever before. We can look at social media but without really understanding how and why it has caused change, it can not be identified as the cause of change. Children and young people have been exposed to violence through films and gaming and whether it was the radio (which many people thought would send us all 'mad'), the television or books, knitting or gambling, there have always been activities that have influenced others or taken the attention of parents away from their children.

We can look at the response to preventative measures like the number of police officers on the streets or the severity of the criminal justice system but prevention efficiency doesn't explain causality.

To create a true solution to the problem of youth violence, we must understand the cause and address it at its roots. The theory of damaged attachment must be researched to confirm causality and determine the immediate, medium and long term solutions for the variety of issues that our children and young people face today.

It is important that we recognise that any effective solution cannot start from a clean slate and be designed without the consideration of our current circumstances. Effective solutions must take us through a process of change, addressing immediate issues and evolving a combination of factors to lead to long term improvements and sustainable positive outcomes.

Immediate Requirements:

We need to immediately recognise the damaging nature of the reactive approaches we currently provide as a resolution to unwanted behaviours in children and young people. It is time to recognise the damaging nature of exclusion, isolation and preventative control as opposed to influence. It is important that we realise children are rarely born bad or misbehaving due to a desire to be bad but instead as an outcome of trauma, detachment and distress.

Issuing blame, punishment and isolating and labelling these children and young people only furthers the trauma, detachment and distress they experience which ultimately leads to events that have been discussed at the serious violence summit. We must immediately replace and compliment these strategies with opportunities, skills and support to understand and overcome trauma and it's effects. It's important that we provide these children and young people with a sense of self confidence, self-worth, belonging and belief in possibility that will help them change the narrative of their future.

This can be achieved through:

- Research the damaged attachment theory to provide evidence base and business case for next steps
- Offer specific training for teachers and other providers of education to ensure they can help overcome trauma and attachment disorders whilst also providing sense of belonging for all pupils
- Focus on improving the perception of PRUs and Alternative Provisions whilst also ensuring all pupils are exposed to experiences that help develop them as individuals as well as receivers of a core curriculum.
- Ensure individuals within the crime and youth justice system have an insight of attachment disorder and have the opportunity to offer appropriate measures for support (this may include referring young offenders who aren't imprisoned to organisations such as the air cadets, sea cadets or army cadets)
- Ensure all workers within the social sector have an awareness and understanding of detachment disorder and offer support to all families regardless of their financial status, employment status or historic mental health conditions.
- Encourage all employers to adopt more flexible working policies for parents particularly during the postnatal period but ultimately throughout childhood.

Mid-term Objectives:

In the mid-term, it is important that we drive a shift in society's understanding of childhood trauma and the behaviours that can be associated with it. It is important that we recognise the impact a simple change like a parent suddenly returning to work could affect a child's self worth, cognition and behaviours in the future.

It is important that we educate all of our society around the causes of childhood mental health problems and behavioural issues so that we can begin to look at long term preventative change.

This educate is a critical component to leading to the longer term shift in an entirely different approach to understanding the postnatal period of parenting, the way we co-ordinate work, parenting and play and better understand what trauma looks like for children, how it can affect their behaviour and how it can be repaired during a child's early years.

Although a full shift is the ultimate ambition, in the mid-term, it will be important that we test and implement alternative provisions in education, childhood therapy and punishment and justice that focuses on repairing damaged attachments in children and young people rather than simply damaging them further.

Long Term Solutions:

In the long term, flexible working for parents must become common place, particularly during a child's early years. Education must be focused on not only providing children with an opportunity to learn a curriculum but also provide an environment where they can explore their own strengths, develop aspirations, opportunities and importantly overcome an adverse experiences with nurture and support rather than isolation and punishment. It will be important that we redefine our understanding of childhood mental illness and the appropriate solutions to behavioural challenges and cognitive diversity once we have secured robust research and evidential support for a new approach.

What this means for Education

To overcome the effects damaged attachment, it is essential for children and young people to have their sense of belonging reinstated and developed.

Currently, children and young people that display signs of damaged attachment are punished, isolated and excluded with an expectation to thrive with limited support, opportunities or aspirations. Teachers are not provided with the training, opportunity or facilities to understand or improve upon challenging behaviours and complex needs created by damaged attachment and are then often faced with the impossible task of providing a sense of inclusion to those young people excluded from our society.

In our opinion, there are two clear opportunities for education to improve upon its outcomes and opportunities for all pupils whilst providing support and improved opportunity to those children and young people that present symptoms of damaged attachment.

It is important that schools and the teachers within them are equipped with knowledge, funding and the recognition they require in order to fulfil this role effectively and support children and young people to evolve as well as learn.

Individual Education:

Within mainstream schools, in light of the variety of correlations detailed at the beginning of this report, it would be beneficial to offer 'individual education' in which the natural learning

preferences, environmental requirements and aspirations of pupils were understood and their learning experiences and curriculum choices were adapted to their needs.

Teachers would be trained to help better understand and support various learning profiles and cognitive differences including ASD, ADHD and attachment disorder.

An individual education could be delivered with the utilisation of unique, education specific psychometric tools and interactive technology that would both support children and young people in their strengths, aspirations, opportunities and requirements; and support teachers and other stakeholders understand the requirements of each child and have the knowledge, tools and business case available to tailor their learning experience.

This approach, based ultimately on personalised prevention, will help ensure children and young people don't fall into a cycle of neglect, isolation and under achievement that remains with them for the rest of their lives. Individual education helps children and young people understand themselves, explore their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities whilst also ensuring they develop a sense of self confidence and belonging.

Embrasive Education

For the children and young people that need additional support and find themselves, for any reason, unable to thrive in mainstream learning environments, it is important for their alternative provisions to be held with an equal parity of esteem to mainstream providers of learning. More importantly, it is important that Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provisions are equipped to provide children and young people with a sense of belonging - a purpose, pride and self-belief that will go some way to repair and evolve damaged attachments and unwanted behaviours rather than simply impounding the negative and destructive thoughts, labels and opportunities that ultimately fuel serious youth violence and crime.

An embrasive education is designed to ensure that all children, regardless of where and how their curriculum is delivered are experience the components of learning that provide them with skills for life and a sense of belonging that provides a solid and strong moral foundation for their future. It is a framework and teaching standard that ensures children and young people who are unable to thrive within mainstream learning environments, still have access to the variety of experiences that help young people develop a sense of belonging that will go some way to overcoming damaged attachment and childhood trauma to change the narrative of their future.

Next Steps

Please refer to the following websites for more information:

www.PhoenixEducationConsultancy.com www.takingcare.business www.MyBrainBoxes.com

If you would like to discuss any information that is detailed in this report in more information please contact info@phoenixeducationconsultancy.com



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