



**transforming
young lives**



**Childhood
First**
healing
hurt
minds



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our vision

To create 21st-century therapeutic environments for the recovery and rehabilitation of children and young people who have suffered abuse, neglect and other trauma.

our mission

To transform the lives of children and young people who suffer severe emotional and psychological difficulties, so that they can relate well to others, fulfill their potential and enjoy life.

our approach

Integrated Systemic Therapy, which is a form of group living

and learning modelled on healthy relationships, adapted to the developmental needs of children and young people suffering severe relational trauma.

values

In all that we do, we strive to embody the values of:

- Interdependence
- Hope
- Thoughtfulness
- Authenticity
- Perseverance.

about us

Childhood First is a charity that provides specialist therapeutic care, education and treatment to children suffering severe emotional and behavioural disturbance as the result of early life trauma. We also provide support to their networks of adult carers.

Our organisation was founded nearly a century ago to look after teenage boys who had got into trouble with the law. Over 40 years ago, the director Melvyn Rose and the charity's trustees recognised that the young people coming for help invariably brought with them histories of family dysfunction, resulting in neglect, abuse and other trauma, that needed a deeper psychotherapeutic approach if they were to be healed and rehabilitated. So began the pioneering and renowned therapeutic work of Childhood First, which has continued to evolve over four decades in response to the needs of some of the most seriously troubled children, young people and families.

At the heart of our approach has been the conviction that:

- The damage caused by relationships can most effectively be healed by relationships
- The more integrated and comprehensive an environment of therapeutic relationships and experiences that we can create, the quicker and more effective will be the child's road to recovery.

These insights have been amply confirmed by the new brain science of the past decade. The children we look after will not be successfully healed in psychiatric hospitals or 1:1 therapy alone, and cannot manage the intimacy of a foster or adoptive family. They need an entire therapeutic environment, wall to wall and 24/7. They need to be surrounded by others, adults and children alike, working together to get to the bottom of their difficulties relating to one another, in the context of daily life, education, leisure and all the normal things that children do. Such therapeutically orchestrated environments are called 'therapeutic

communities', which are now recognised by the Royal College of Psychiatrists as the most effective treatment for a range of attachment and personality disorders, and other diagnoses and related symptoms, such as self-harm and addiction. Our first therapeutic community for young people was founded at Peper Harow in Surrey in 1970. Its success attracted much attention from government, media and professionals. Sadly it was damaged by fire and closed in 1993, but not before **Thornby Hall** in Northamptonshire had also been established in 1986.

Continued success led to the founding of Cumberlow Community in South Norwood in 1991. Cumberlow closed in 2005 when it became clear that its location was no longer suitable for such vulnerable young people. Dovecote House, a partnership with East Sussex local authority, lasted four years (1991-1994) and was closed due to local government reorganisation. Since then a series of communities has opened, **Earthsea House and School** (1999) in Norfolk, **Greenfields House and School** (1999) in Kent,

Merrywood House in Norfolk (2005), and **Gables House** in Kent opened in summer 2012. Our history demonstrates that we are the experts in the development of therapeutic communities for the treatment of seriously disturbed children and young people. These facilities remain extremely rare, and no other organisation has the breadth and scale of experience, or the reputation, in this field that Childhood First enjoys. From our origins 90 years ago, we have become pioneering leaders in the field of mental health care for traumatised children and young people.



Integrated Systemic Therapy (iST)

Childhood First's unique and effective therapeutic method has evolved over 40 years and is called Integrated Systemic Therapy (iST). It transforms young lives, delivering unparalleled success in the treatment of children and young people suffering serious emotional and behavioural disturbance.

It is rooted in two streams of therapeutic tradition:

- The 'planned environment' or 'milieu therapy' of the therapeutic community movement
- The 'systemic' (family and group systems) thinking which emerged from the psychoanalytic movement.

iST is also perfectly aligned with the findings of modern brain science, which offers new insight into why our approach is so successful.

The children's needs

When they come to us, children's earlier life trauma is expressed through disturbed, violent and sometimes sexualised behaviours which communicate their distress. Most have had a profoundly disrupted parenting experience in their first five years of life. To recover from this severe relational trauma and to develop, they require an experience of profoundly healing relationships.

Clinical expertise

Having lacked the opportunity to learn to process emotion and to relate to others, traumatised children need an environment where developing these capacities and skills is the explicit focus and clinical expertise.

Hope

The key outcome for which we strive is to maximise each child's capacity to live in healthy, hopeful relationship with others. On this depends all of the other necessary outcomes which contribute to their thriving.

Parenting

Whatever their symptoms, the children referred to us have been damaged by adults who struggle to relate well. It is only through experiencing healthy adult relationships that eventual and enduring recovery is found. iST is at heart a highly specialised model of parenting, capable of coping with the needs of traumatised children, and which is founded on adults having the time, energy and enthusiasm to spend thinking together in depth about, and with, children.

Robust, skilful, compassionate

iST is **robust** – to contain the extreme levels of behavioural disturbance so that all of the children and adults who live in our homes can do so safely. Children can then stay with us for long enough to allow trusting relationships to be built, and crucial therapeutic and educational work to be done.

iST is **skilful** – to ensure that the painful disclosing, understanding and healing of trauma takes place for each child, and the ability to make healthy attachments is learned.

iST is **compassionate** – so that every child can learn that they are loveable and loved, however aggressive or destructive the communication of their distress, anger, shame.

Breaking the cycle

Traumatised children learn with us to appreciate what a warm, loving and ordinary 'family' life and education is like. The cycle of trauma is broken, enabling a return to mainstream family life, either in birth or substitute family, or on to independent living at 18+.

iST
INTEGRATED
SYSTEMIC
THERAPY



therapeutic education

At each of our communities, we aim to provide not only first-class therapeutic care and treatment, but also an effective and inspiring education which allows each child to catch up with their mainstream peers, develop an enjoyment of learning and achieve their potential.

Most of the children and young people who come to us have experienced severe disruption in their educational progress. Some have never been able to manage formal schooling and most will have a Statement of Educational Needs. Our therapeutic approach enables all to achieve and experience success, often for the first time, so building confidence and self-esteem; those who are with us for two years or more experience exceptional outcomes.

Therapeutic education considers and addresses emotional and cognitive development together, and in stages tailor-made to the needs of the whole child. Such children and young people need an integrated, seamless, containing experience across all aspects of their lives, and our integrated approach delivers this. At each community we think together at all times about the particular emotional and cognitive needs of each child and young person.

Each school follows the National Curriculum in our own Registered Special Schools at Thornby Hall and at Greenfields (incorporating Gables House). We work in partnership with the on-site Norfolk short stay school at Earthsea House and Merrywood House. Specialist educational psychologists consult to us, to help diagnose and address specific learning difficulties.

Where appropriate we provide expert help in the transition from special school or short stay school to mainstream school or college, and provide the necessary continuing support working closely with the school or college which they are attending.

For detailed information about a particular school please email enquiries@childhoodfirst.org.uk or telephone **020 7928 7388**.

Integrated Therapeutic Fostering (iTf)

This is a new and pioneering therapeutic fostering service that has been developed in collaboration with a leading and established independent fostering provider, AFA Fostering, where both organisations bring reputations for consistently innovative and high quality care in their respective fields. This partnership utilises the strengths, skills and expertise of the two organisations to offer the new iTf – Integrated Therapeutic Fostering service, initially in the East Anglia area and, in due course, to be rolled out across the country.

Integrated Therapeutic Fostering harnesses the key elements provided by each organisation's core services and combines them to provide a unique and innovative service. This service enables children and young people who need intensive therapeutic support, and yet are considered able to manage in a family setting, to experience a consistent family life at the same time as healing the trauma of their past, supporting their recovery and developing improved socialisation and life outcomes. iTf provides an alternative option for all placing authorities mid-way between a standard foster care placement and a more specialised residential therapeutic placement. It will use highly experienced, trained and resilient foster carers. These carers participate in a course of specialist Integrated Systemic Therapy (iST) training and will be supported 24/7 by both partner organisations in their respective fields of expertise.

The management, support and containment of all iTf placements consists of three regular and key components: Supervision, both statutory and clinical; Reflective Practice Groups incorporating supervising staff and foster carers and Study Seminars – where all iTf foster carers are invited to explore iST – Integrated Systemic Therapy theory in a deeper form.



assessment and consultation

We undertake in-depth assessment of the emotional, psychological and educational needs of all the children who come to us for help, at each stage of their journey through their placement. We also provide specialist assessments for courts and other agencies. And we consult to and facilitate external professionals and organisations in thinking about the needs of traumatised children.

The need for assessment

Effective treatment of children and young people who present severe emotional and behavioural problems depends on accurate assessment. Assessment is integral to the treatment method which we use: Integrated Systemic Therapy (iST) for children and young people referred either to our residential facilities, or to our Placement and Family Support or Integrated Therapeutic Fostering (iTF) services.

In-depth assessment

The emotional and mental difficulties of the children we encounter are rooted in relational trauma and cannot be understood and treated via a simplistic symptom-diagnosis-prescription sequence. The children's difficulties are the result of layers of profound relational failures and complex human interactions occurring over many years, critically disrupting early stages of development. Assessment is a complex process involving the collation, analysis, integration and understanding of evidence derived from a wide range of sources. Based on our Assessment, Placement, Treatment, Transition (APTT) framework, it is an iterative process, gradually building a fuller picture as layers of evidence are gathered from historical, behavioural, emotional and clinical sources.

Holistic assessment

The wellbeing of traumatised children can be effectively addressed only by taking an holistic approach to assessment, planning and treatment. We focus accordingly

on detailed understanding not only of the child but on the whole system of relationships within which they live. Particular attention is paid to obstacles to the child's improvement within the familial and professional networks, and to strategies for improvement.

Scope of assessment

iST assessment includes analysis of:

- The internal world of the child
- The external environment within which the child lives
- The impact of past experience on developmental stages
- The child's present functioning together with planning for future.

iST assessment of a child's functioning involves an evaluation of:

- Physical health
- Emotional and mental health
- Sexual and psychosexual development
- Psychosocial development
- Educational development and achievement.

iST assessment is multi-disciplinary, incorporating input from psychotherapy, psychiatry, social work and education.

Sources of understanding

Sources for iST assessment include:

Child Observation

The most significant source for assessment for children referred to our residential centres and Placement and Family Support service are the feelings and associated insights of our therapeutic staff, whose professional specialism is attunement to the emotional and psychological needs of traumatised children (see Integrated Systemic Therapy for further details). Using techniques developed from infant observation, staff are trained to observe children intensively, especially in their relations to others. Staff receive consultation from child psychotherapists in using their own emotional responses as data to help assess the emotional state of the child.



Engagement with the Child

Staff engage intensively with the child. This engagement will be carefully managed to fit with the child's mode of communication and will incorporate symbolic communication and dialogue as an important source of information. We consider carefully the stage at which the child or young person is engaged in the process of consciously exploring their own perception of their needs, and how we can help them to feel safely understood and supported by the whole network of systems and relationships.

Family Consultation

An assessment of current family functioning is developed through a series of direct meetings, where possible. We explore the relationships within the family; relationship to external authorities; needs and expectations.

Review of Reports

A detailed review of all existing information about a child is undertaken. This includes an analysis of social history and chronology; psychiatric, psychological and education reports; previous placement history (including an assessment of their success and/or failure); current statement of needs; Children's Services Care Plan, etc.

Professional Consultation

Past and present involvement of professionals is examined. Interviews are held with the existing network in the areas of social care, health and education, with a view to developing collaborative understanding; identifying expectations, obstacles and support needs.

Aims of assessment

The aim of iST assessment is the development of co-ordinated strategies to measure, plan, deliver, review and continually improve each child's treatment and progress towards recovery. The in-depth and holistic process of iST assessment is used to:

- Identify better the needs of children and their families/carers/networks
- Support referrers with placement planning and placement stability
- Tailor programmes of treatment for children, and support for their families/carers/networks.

Further details

For further details of our assessment services please contact **020 7928 7388**.

Consultation

In addition to providing residential treatment centres plus specialist Placement and Family Support and Integrated Therapeutic Fostering (iTF) services, we also consult to and facilitate external professionals and organisations in:

- Therapeutic child care and treatment
- The management and organisation of child care and treatment
- Staff and carer support.



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