

Empowering adults to be active agents for therapeutic change for children. Three questions are used to find children's strengths, define priority parenting tasks, and provide trauma-informed care that works.

By Colin Maginn © 2nd May 2025

This article uses three questions to help organise how we think about our role in children's lives. It is written for today's conference, for parents, those in the parenting role, those working with children, those supporting them, senior managers, and policymakers.

A good starting point is to be optimistic and believe in the power of empathy between adults and children, as well as in good relationships, attachments, and attunement. A strength-based approach can help get the best out of each child and support recovery, with positive adaptations to trauma leading to post-traumatic growth.

The three questions: The name Amy illustrates the importance of putting the child first, and that Amy is not just another research statistic.

1) **'What are Amy's strengths, skills and talents?'** Find her strengths, skills, and talents, and support her in finding fun ways to use them.

2) **'What are Amy's parenting needs?'** Using our eight Pillars of Parenting and the progress and development assessment, make a baseline and identify Amy's current priority parenting needs to find tasks that meet them.

3) **'Where is Amy at on her trauma journey?'** Listen to Amy's story, have input from the key adults in her life, and read her file. We use our trauma assessment (based on Cairns 2002) to set a baseline, then monitor Amy's trauma journey with help from a psychology consultant to discuss and agree on the support to provide Amy at each stage of her trauma journey.

The first question: 'What are Amy's strengths, skills and talents?'

Before looking for children's strengths, we need to acknowledge that children in public care are often perceived as being problematic. However, UK Government statistics show that only 1% of children who are placed into care are there because of their anti-social behaviour. Over 95% of children in care are there because of abuse or other adult problems.

Looking for, finding, and helping young people use their strengths is a great place to start. As each child is unique, it helps to think outside the box. Look for strengths in every area of their life, not just cognitive skills. Look to their self-care skills, emotional skills, physical skills, communication skills, social skills, creative skills, and any individual skills that you see. Ask Amy, as she is the expert on herself.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide an inventory of character strengths; for a copy, click QR code 1 in the references. Also, to help children be 'in the zone', find what they enjoy doing that involves a challenge and that they are good at. To find 'Flow' or to enjoy 'optimal experiences', see Csikszentmihályi (1996) 'Finding Flow' (in the references, QR code 1).

The second question: 'What are Amy's parenting needs?' To measure progress, we take a baseline using our 'Progress and Development' assessment based on our 'Eight Pillars of Parenting'. The input and observations of both Amy and the adult or adults in the parenting role help them discuss and agree on Amy's current priority parenting needs and tasks that address her needs. Over time, new priority needs are identified, and new tasks are agreed upon. A list of the eight Pillars of Parenting, with detailed breakdowns, can be downloaded using QR code 1 in the references.

The third question: 'Where is Amy on her trauma journey?' To answer question three, again using our progress and development checklist based on Kate Cairns model (2002). We have adopted her three stages in the trauma journey, i.e.

- 1) Stabilisation - Removal from a traumatic living environment.
- 2) Integration - Coping with post-traumatic emotions, such as despair, guilt, and anger.
- 3) Adaptation - Cognitive reconstruction of adversity, finding a way to cope with adverse events. We have added an optimistic and achievable fourth stage.
- 4) Emotional Growth – positive relationships and connections with the growth of trust, resilience, and self-worth.

While it's easy to ask the questions, finding the correct answers should be a team effort, including Amy, the psychologist and the other supporting professionals, to help Amy move through the trauma journey, detailing the support she needs to deal with the trauma and achieve emotional growth.

Background to trauma-informed care in the UK.

In the UK, organisations from schools to children's homes are spending time and money training staff on 'trauma-informed practice', which is mainly ineffective. Asmussen (2022) analysed results from trauma-informed care approaches in 58 children's social care teams and found that "trauma-informed activities rarely led to evidence-based interventions" (p. 32), with only 2 out of the 58 studies analysed producing evidence-based interventions. Rather than focusing on an individual child, staff learn theory from large-scale 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs) studies. In their research, Hambrick (2019) and her colleagues show that ACE scores are too simple to capture the complexity of the many additional factors unique to each child.

The child is much more than their trauma; they each experience trauma differently. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk (2014) writes, '...trauma isn't what happens to you, but how you respond to the traumatic situation. Something that is traumatic to one person may be no big deal to the next. Whether something becomes traumatic or not has a great deal to do with who's around you while you experienced this event. Were you alone and scared, were you comforted by friends and family?' The person in the parenting role should be sensitive to the ways that different children respond to trauma, taking a holistic approach to each child's various needs.

'Emotional Warmth Parenting' Cameron, R.J. and Maginn, C. is a holistic approach which is natural and includes physical, emotional, psychological, and educational needs. Education is not just what happens in school. Indeed, learning is most effective in play, fun, and exploration. The brain will not be focused on trauma at the same time as having fun, playing games with other children, or enjoying 'flow'. Nor, indeed, while sitting down to enjoy their favourite meal. Play, fun, enjoyable, and even challenging activities are part of the healing process; everyday things still happen, and help contextualise the trauma.

Amid the chaos of working with traumatised children, your love, insights, patience, empathy and compassion can give you and the children life-changing fulfilment.

References:

- Cairns, K. (2002). *Attachment Trauma and Resilience*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.
- Cameron, R.J. and Maginn, C. (2021). *It's a Privilege – when a child in care is delighted, it's you: Emotional Warmth Parenting*. Sunderland: The Pillars of Parenting Ltd (Publishing).
- Csikszentmihályi M (1996), *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life*, Basic Books.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification (Vol. 1)*. Oxford University Press.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin Books.

Click the QR code to download:

1. A summary of the eight Pillars of Parenting with explanation notes.
2. Notes explaining 'Flow'
3. Inventory of character strengths, by Peterson and Seligman (2004)

Also, for a copy of today's presentation, download the pdf with the **QR code 4**, at the bottom of the other side of this page.

QR code 1



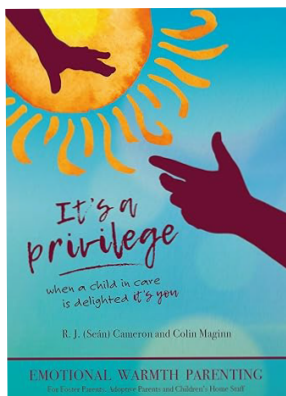
Services and training provided by 'The Pillars of Parenting Ltd.'



1) **eLearning:** Seven e-learning modules cover the theory and research behind the 'Emotional Warmth Parenting' approach and the practical aspects of finding and meeting a child's parenting needs, and building their strengths. The e-learning course also covers understanding the impact of trauma and how to support the child to go beyond recovering from trauma, to achieve 'post-traumatic growth'. The seven module costs £16+VAT each (or £14+VAT each, if ordered and paid for together, i.e. all seven modules for £98+VAT).



QR code 2



2) **Our book:** Cameron, R. J. and Maginn, C. (2021) 'It's a privilege: When a child in care is delighted, it's you.'

QR code 3
Conference
rate for our
book: £15



'It's a privilege' challenges the view that children in public care are 'problem children'. 'Emotional Warmth Parenting' for a child exposed to abuse, emotional coldness and trauma, will not only bring joy, fun and meaning into the child's life, but it also leads to fulfilment in the lives of the adults in the parenting role.

www.pillarsofparenting.co.uk/index.php/product/its-a-privilege-foster-parent-pricing/

3) **Progress and development checklist online.** This assessment provides a baseline record and follow up measures to monitor each child's progress or otherwise, using the baseline as a reference point. This is to enable carers to seek out young peoples strengths skills and talents, identify priority parenting tasks, and track a child's trauma journey with child focused support at each stage. For details, contact Colin Maginn (details below).

4) **Face-to-Face training:** with handouts and articles covering the following topics:

- Trauma-informed care that works (understanding that a child is more than their trauma).
- Understanding aggression and de-escalation strategies and techniques.
- Strengths: Finding and using young people's strengths (positive psychology in childcare).
- Analysing, reinterpreting and managing 'Challenging Behaviour' using the ABCD+C approach.
- Attachment strategies – using Pat Crittenden's Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM) of attachment to have a more optimistic understanding of children in public care.
- Caring for the carers. Recognising burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma, and how to protect yourself and your team and achieve compassion satisfaction.
- You choose! Tap into the knowledge base. Working with traumatised children in public care is challenging and complex, but can be very rewarding. What particular issue or topic would you like to know more about? We have access to some of the top psychologists in England, so even training on very specialist matters will likely be covered by one of our colleagues. (For details and costs, contact Colin Maginn - details below)

5) **'Emotional Warmth Parenting' Information packs £50, including a three hours Zoom training session** covering three topics: 1) Finding and using your and the young person's strengths. 2) Using the eight Pillars of Parenting to identify priority parenting tasks and 3) Trauma-informed care that works. The Zoom sessions are on:

28-05-25 9.30am to 12.30pm. Repeated on the **24-06-25** 9.30am to 12.30pm and on the **11-07-25** 9.30am to 12.30am.

Included in the pack, Our book **'It's a Privilege.'** **Two peer-reviewed research papers by Dr. Seán Cameron.**

- 1) Cameron, R.J. (2017). Child Psychology beyond the school gates. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 34(3), 74-95. and
- 2) Cameron, R. J., & Das, R. K. (2019). Empowering residential carers of looked-after young people. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(7), 1893-1912. **Plus six sector press articles by Colin Maginn:** 1) Maginn, C. (2019) 'The Yellow Socks Theory'. *The Therapeutic Care Journal*. 2) Maginn, C. (2019) 'What's love got to do with it? How to stabilise children in public care with cost-effective quality'. *CYC-Online* July 2019. 3) Maginn, C. (1st April 2020) 'A modest proposal to help looked after children'. *The Therapeutic Care Journal*. An article on the importance of human touch. 4) Maginn, C. & Cameron, S. (2021) 'Emotional Warmth Parenting' *CYC-Online*. 5) Maginn, C. (2021) 'Why we need to focus on strengths'. *Fostering Families*. Jan 2021. 6) Maginn, C. (2021) 'Understanding aggression', *Fostering Families*. September 2021 p 18-21.



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