



## Iceberg Model trauma-informed guide

# Special events and celebrations

## Introduction

Many caregivers find that the child or young person's behaviour changes during special events and celebrations such as Christmas or on birthdays.

## Tip of the iceberg (what we can see)

Children and young people may experience meltdowns, demonstrate defiance or aggressive behaviour, or be very demanding of their caregiver's time and energy on special occasions. Others may withdraw, seem depressed or anxious, appear unappreciative or sabotage the event. These behaviours can occur regardless of how objectively pleasant the scheduled event may be.

## What is happening underneath the surface?

There are many reasons that children and young people who have been harmed may find important events difficult at times.

### The child or young person is overwhelmed by all the activity

Children and young people who have experienced harm have learned that it is important to constantly monitor activity going on around them. This is a survival behaviour which helps protect them from potential threats (like an angry caregiver or an adult who is behaving unsafely). For the same reason, children and young people who have experienced harm can often present as more stressed and reactive than their peers which is a result of their bodies being ready to 'fight' or 'flee' a situation at any given moment to keep themselves safe. Even though children and young people are now in a safe environment with a safe caregiver, it may take a long time for their body and mind to adjust to and believe this. This means that they will still be hyper-vigilant to potential threats in their environment. During special events, there is more stimulation and more sensory information that children and young people have to be alert to and make sense of. This can lead to greater levels of stress, reactivity and more maladaptive coping strategies (or survival behaviours) as they try their best to keep themselves safe with their own limited resources.

### The child or young person struggles with big feelings (even positive ones)

For children and young people who struggle to understand their emotions, social events can be emotionally confusing. While the child or young person might start out feeling happy during a birthday party for example, as that emotion gets bigger it becomes overwhelming and confusing. Their level of emotional arousal rises higher and higher and can be misinterpreted by children and young people as anxiety, stress or fear. This can lead to an escalation in behaviour.

Many special events such as Christmas or birthdays may also remind the child or young person of earlier times with the people who harmed them. This may evoke many mixed and confusing feelings for the child or young person including anxiety, longing, loneliness, and fear. To avoid those painful feelings, the child or young person may avoid or sabotage social events, or their behaviour may dysregulate during the event.

### **The child or young person struggles with social expectations**

Special events often involve lots of social contact where children and young people are expected to behave in a particular way. Children and young people who have experienced harm often have difficulties with social skills because they may not have seen or been taught appropriate behaviour and social interactions. The child or young person can often be very sensitive to rejection and may have previously experienced judgment or criticism at big events. When combined with big feelings and worries about staying safe, it is easy to see how understanding and meeting social expectations becomes difficult for the child or young person who has been harmed. Sometimes, the child or young person may avoid or sabotage a social event to avoid feeling these overwhelming things. This is a survival behaviour and is not personal or aimed towards their caregiver or other special people in their lives.

### **It reminds the child or young person that they are in care**

Children and young people who enter care need to make sense of this many times in life. Things that remind them that they are different to other children and young people may bring up feelings of loss, grief, and shame. Anniversaries (such as the day they came into care) may be experienced as a distressing time, remind them of their separation from their family and bring up feelings of grief, abandonment, or rejection. In addition, the child or young person may miss the special traditions they enjoyed in previous settings.

### **The child or young person associates important events with shame, loss or disappointment**

Many children and young people who have been harmed have difficult memories of special events and celebrations. The child or young person may have missed out on special celebrations because the adults in their lives were unable to prioritise them over other things that were happening within the family. They may have seen adults becoming intoxicated or angry and behaving in unsafe ways. They may have been promised wonderful things that were not delivered and then mocked or shamed when they became distressed. All of these experiences are deeply painful and/or frightening and may cause the child or young person to feel anxious and vulnerable about future significant events. Whilst special events and celebrations may be managed in a very different way in a caregiver's home, it can take a long time for the child or young person to develop trust in the new way of doing things. In the meantime, the child or young person will need special care during, before and after special events and celebrations.

### **The child or young person does not believe that they deserve good things**

Children and young people who have histories of trauma can often feel unworthy of large celebrations. They may feel uncomfortable with the positive attention and may feel shameful and not worthy of the gifts and attention they receive at these events. They may also anticipate that they will not be able to meet caregivers' expectations for their behaviour during big social events or festivities.

This might be demonstrated through escalated behaviours, refusing to go to or engage with an event, sabotaging the event or a generally appearing unappreciative. These again are survival behaviours designed to limit the amount of exposure the child or young person has to the overwhelming feelings of worthlessness or shame.

## **Understanding special events and celebrations in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture**

Special events and celebrations are important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as they provide the opportunity to ignite and promote culture in a society that has otherwise attempted to erase it. This may involve cultural traditions such as ceremonies, dances, storytelling, foods, or time on Country. Cultural events provide opportunities for a young person to connect to their identity and culture and promotes a sense of belonging. Encouraging a child to attend cultural events can ensure they are involved with support networks in the community (i. e., Elders, mentors). Caregivers must maintain cultural humility and sensitivity in respecting protocols and taking the opportunity to learn from the child about their practices.

## **Strategies to promote healing**

There are many things that caregivers can do to make special events and celebrations more inclusive and meaningful for children and young people in care.

### **Consider the child or young person's social and developmental age**

People often form expectations about the capacities children and young people should have based on their age. Children and young people who have experienced harm may have developmental delays or regress in their behaviour when they are upset. This means they might act like a child who is several years younger than their chronological age. When making decisions about what the child or young person would be able to tolerate or how they might respond, it is important to consider their developmental, rather than chronological age. This is not indulgent. Instead, it will give the child or young person the support they need to grow and develop to the full potential.

At times, caregivers may find that members of the community share unhelpful opinions about how children and young people 'should' behave at celebrations. It is important to ignore these and advocate for the accommodations and supports that the child or young person needs. Remember that even 'typically' developing children may struggle to remain regulated during special celebrations or festivities due to various factors such as over-stimulation, changes in routines and foods, later bedtimes, and subsequent exhaustion - even adults can struggle! Given this, expectations about the child or young person's behaviour may need to change during these times.

### **Help the child or young person to prepare**

Caregivers should use their knowledge about the child or young person to gauge how much preparation they will need. If unsure, start at the beginning. Tell the child or young person what the event is called, what the purpose of it is, what is likely to happen during the celebration, who will be attending and how long it will go for. Outline the general expectations about behaviour and participation, including any choices that the child or young person will be able to make. It can be helpful to use visual aids to help make sense of things and to track the lead up to the event on a calendar or to count down in 'sleeps'.

## Identify escape routes for trigger points

Work together with the child or young person to identify likely points of tension and create alternative pathways they can take during times they may feel like they want to leave a situation. Some common points of difficulty include when somebody else is getting presents, when everyone is expected to sit quietly and listen to speeches and periods of unstructured play with other children. If the child or young person is easily overwhelmed by many people and high levels of noise, ensure they have a safe spot they can retreat to. If the event is not at home, ask the host if there are any existing options, bring a play-tent that nobody else is allowed to enter or take a pair of noise cancelling headphones or a digital device that allows the child or young person to 'check out' for a while without having to leave the celebration.

If the child or young person struggles with quiet or stillness, caregivers can ensure there are physical and stimulating activities they can engage in, like dancing or engaging in physical games like 'chasey' or Twister. If the celebration will include speeches, a religious ceremony or any other component that requires guests to be quiet, allow the child or young person to 'opt out' of this and engage in some of their alternative activities in an area that will not affect other guests.

## Limit the size and duration of the event

Everyone has a 'ceiling' for novel experiences after which people feel tired, worn-out and need to go back to their usual routine. Adults might have a ceiling several hours away, but children and young people often have a much shorter window of tolerance and this is even briefer for children and young people who have experienced trauma. Children and young people are most likely to succeed when events are kept short and focused. For example, some children and young people may only be able to cope with birthday celebrations for half an hour before becoming too overwhelmed and unable to manage, whilst others may be able to stay for an hour or two. For similar reasons, if caregivers are able to influence the guest list for an event, try to limit the amount of people who will attend. Explain to the child or young person that you are keeping things small to make sure it is successful and safe. While it may sometimes feel frustrating to leave an event early or change the way it is designed, without these sorts of supports, the child or young person is likely to experience the event as another 'failure'. Small successes are beneficial for children and young people's development and your relationship with them.

## Avoid competitive games and activities

Some children and young people may particularly struggle with competitive games and activities. They may find it difficult to play by the rules, get very upset if they lose or become overwhelmed if they win. It is important to organise games that prioritise participation over winning and after which all players receive equal rewards. For example, if children and young people are going to be involved in a treasure hunt, then they need to take all that they find to an adult who will then divide the findings equally amongst participants. It is important to be available and attentive to the child or young person at these times if they particularly struggle with sharing or social interactions.

## Keep intense attention within tolerable limits

It might seem counterintuitive but some children and young people who have experienced trauma really struggle with intense attention, even of a positive nature. There are many reasons for this, including that they may feel underserved, may not have a template for how to understand or respond to this and may become overwhelmed by their emotions. If the child or young person is the focus of the celebration or special event, it is important to limit intense attention in a way that meets their needs. For example, when receiving and opening presents, the caregiver may want to stagger the giving of gifts, have a table to the side where gifts are placed or choose to open them after the party is over. Similarly, a break between singing 'happy birthday' and cutting the cake might be a good idea.

## Create a network of support

It is important for caregivers to be physically and emotionally available to the child or young person throughout the event in case they require some assistance to calm down. Caregivers may also like to enlist the help of other safe and trusted people to help make the event a success. For example, perhaps a friend or family member could ensure that the caregiver and their child or young person has drinks and are able to eat even if they need to spend most of the event away from the food because this area is too busy. Or perhaps several trusted persons could tag-team engaging the child or young person in physical games so that the caregiver has an opportunity to sit down and enjoy the event. Perhaps a friend could offer an explanation and farewell if the caregiver and child or young person needs to leave quickly because the child or young person has become too overwhelmed to cope and saying goodbye is too much for you both to manage.

## Help the child or young person make sense of their behaviour

Often, children and young people do not understand why they find special events and celebrations difficult but are aware that they are not able to participate in the same way as others. This leaves them with feelings of embarrassment and shame, further complicating their ability to engage in future events. Narrating their needs and behaviour in a compassionate, non-judgmental way can help them to understand their own actions and reduce feelings of shame or self-blame. Let the child or young person know that many children and young people struggle with big events, and it is reasonable for them to need some supports to be able to engage.

## A note about alcohol

Many children and young people who have experienced harm have seen adults behaving in frightening and unsafe ways after drinking alcohol. If it is known that the child or young person has experienced this, consider not offering alcohol at special events and celebrations that they will be attending. If it will be offered, be mindful of increasing physical proximity and availability for the child or young person, especially if people are behaving loudly or boisterously. Caregivers may also wish to leave the event early. It is also important to note that the smell of alcohol on the breath of caregivers or other important people can be a powerful trigger for many children and young people in care.

## **Additional considerations when providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.**

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people need to be understood within the context of historical, political and systematic disadvantages and the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. When caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, caregivers should ensure that they have received appropriate training and support from their caregiver support agency or the relevant departmental staff. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are cared for by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregivers, children are likely to experience culture shock as the special events and celebrations differ across cultures and communities. Therefore, caregivers should develop an understanding of the child or young person's cultural background to strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive environment to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care are provided with ample opportunities to participate in special events and celebrations which are important in their culture and play a key role in shaping their identity.

When caring for and thinking about the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional factors that may contribute to their needs and behaviour need to be considered. These include cultural and intergenerational trauma caused by harmful practices associated with colonisation such as forced dispossession of land and Country, forced suppression of culture, the Stolen Generations, assimilation policies, and systemic racism and oppression. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may also hold broader notions of wellbeing that include spirituality, community, and interconnectedness with land that must be recognised and supported.

Caregivers should also understand that connection to culture, Country, kin and family are highly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people therefore assisting the child or young person to maintain these relationships may help strengthen their own understanding of special events and celebrations. It must be noted that the meaning and significance of some special events and celebrations may also differ across cultures and communities therefore caregivers should approach these matters with cultural respect and sensitivity.

## **Additional considerations when providing care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds**

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background also have cultural events and celebrations which differ from the caregivers own culture and community. Therefore, it is important for caregivers to receive additional information, training and support from their caregiver support agency or relevant departmental staff when caring for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caregivers can connect with local CALD organisations to continue to enhance their understanding of the child or young person's cultural background and special events and celebrations which are important for the child or young person. It is critical that children and young people from CALD backgrounds are provided with appropriate opportunities to connect with their culture and community through these events.

## Iceberg model in action

### Emma in family based care

Last year, 13-year-old Emma asked for a big birthday party with all of her friends. However, when the day arrived, she spent most of the time hiding in her bedroom and ignoring her guests. Emma also said some unkind things to her caregivers and friends. Afterwards, she refused to talk about it and became upset whenever her caregiver tried to bring it up.

Emma's caregiver listens to the messages underneath the behaviour – *"I loved the idea of a big party with all my special people there but the reality of it was scary and overwhelming. I want to have the same things as other kids my age, but I can't quite cope. I'm sad, embarrassed, and confused about what I did."*

Emma's caregiver responds by listening to Emma's requests for her party this year but putting in boundaries based on experience. They limit the number of guests, reduce the duration and number of activities, and help Emma come up with some suggestions for a 'chill out zone' that anyone can go to if they need a break. Emma's caregiver is compassionate when Emma gets frustrated about her caregiver putting limits on the party plans but continues to hold the boundaries so that she is more likely to have a positive experience this year.

### Mason in residential care

6-year old Mason is relatively new to his residential care placement. His residential care workers are going to have birthday party for another child in the placement and want to prepare Mason for it. Mason's workers know that he experienced chronic neglect in the past and are unsure of what his understanding of special celebrations might be. They try gently asking him about it but he does not reply.

Mason's residential care workers respond by going right back to basics and talking him through the event in detail. These conversations are split up over multiple brief chats and repeated over time so that Mason has a better chance of understanding. Because Mason's workers do not know how he may cope with a big event, they choose to keep the celebration small, time limited and only invite a small number of guests including children. They also use their existing knowledge of how Mason copes during busy times to guess at some accommodations for him. The workers tell Mason – *"In two weeks, it's going to be Brodie's birthday party. This is an exciting day for Brodie, and we are going to celebrate with a party. At a birthday party, some of the special people in your life get together, have some nice food to eat and sometimes give presents. It's a way of saying 'I like you and I'm happy that you are celebrating a birthday.' We would like you to be at the party and join in. Brodie's party is going to be on a Saturday and start at lunchtime. People will start coming together from about 12pm when the big hand and the little hand are pointing up. It's normal for some people to be early and others to be a bit late. We've noticed that it's stressful for you when there are lots of people coming together in a big group. Would you like to have some digital time in your room with your headphones until everybody is here? Or come with me to go for a walk instead?"*

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact your case worker for further support.