

TIP SHEET #5 – Understanding behavior through *The Iceberg Model*

Lorren Arezio

Clinical Psychologist

Supporting children & families who have experienced stress, trauma & disruption.

Influence of our home environment

All of us have been shaped by the environment we have grown up in. A healthy and nurturing environment will allow a child to flourish and ultimately develop adaptive, resilient, and flexible coping strategies in the face of stress. In contrast, poor environments will negatively impact the developing child and lead to inflexibility and limited coping options in the face of challenge.

Issues for children with trauma

Many fostered and adopted children have had compromised beginnings. Many have experienced inconsistent or terrifying parenting, abandonment, or abuse. Many have not had their physical and emotional needs consistently met and have often been left to fend for themselves without the benefit of consistent and nurturing adults. When their abuse has been significant, repeated or prolonged, these experiences for a young child often result in the development of a range of behavioural difficulties and maladaptive coping strategies. As they have not been able to remain connected to their parents in a positive and predictable way, these strategies often act to maintain some connection to an adult, even if it is negative, such as being yelled at. After all, better to connect negatively and in a way that is in the child's control, than to have no or unpredictable connection. Coping strategies that develop in this way in the face of threat and danger, often remain strong and can remain easily triggered, even when the danger is later removed.

interaction with adults that in some way the child has come to believe is helpful for them. The difficulty is that these ways of interaction become habits and patterns that are well entrenched for the child. They may now be able to have their needs met in more positive ways, they just don't have the pattern for these. They need a reflective adult to help them develop these.

Waterline ('Shark Music' instinctive responses)

The waterline represents the shark music for the child – the automatic, emotional, unconscious feeling state that has become associated with danger. When shark music feelings are triggered, the learned defense is to activate the top of the iceberg coping strategies. The child has learned that this is the only way to stay safe, to have some control over what happens next, and to avoid falling into shame (see *Under the Iceberg*).

Through repetition, the shark music response has become automatic. As these patterns likely developed when the child was pre-verbal, they are instinctive and unavailable to conscious thought, and more readily activated when arousal levels are high. This is the reason why talking in the moment of crisis is rarely effective. The child's body is reacting in defense and is not open to reason.

Over time, cues or triggers are often generalised and no longer apply exclusively to just the trauma events or circumstances in which they occurred. This means that the child may now respond to a range of otherwise benign triggers with the same trauma response and desperation as if experiencing the original trauma. This is often not understood by those around them, who are left feeling shocked and surprised at the intense response to seemingly small events. So for example, a child who was frequently yelled at or treated harshly, may come to fear placing themselves in any position where they may be judged. Just the mention of completing a test at school may trigger their fight flight or freeze response rather than risk getting something wrong. This means they cease trying as their fear of being exposed is too strong.

The waterline and its impact can vary and is not necessarily static. Similar to a thermostat or gauge, the level where the water is sitting reflects the child's current internal anxiety, and therefore their emotional capacity. Accurately reading the child will help to know how to respond and how receptive they will be. Sometimes you may assess they have little tolerance and no flexibility of response. These can be thought of as 'High Water Mark'. Conversely, other times they have more reserve, are less affected and able to make better use of the help you may be providing ('Low Water Mark').

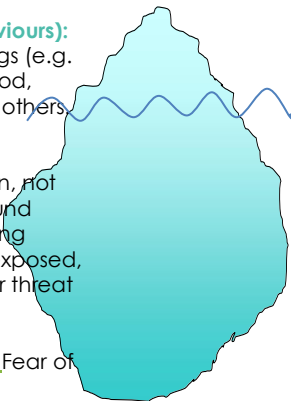
THE ICEBERG MODEL

Tip of the Iceberg (coping behaviours):

E.g. yelling, hitting, throwing things (e.g. holes in walls), lying, hoarding food, negative comments, controlling others.

Waterline (Shark Music): Feeling overwhelmed; (sensory confusion, not understand what's going on around them, no adults in charge); Feeling negative judgment (cornered, exposed, everyone looking); Feeling under threat (perceived or real).

Under the Iceberg (core issues): Fear of being hurt again; Fear of being abandoned or alone; Fear of not being liked and rejected; Fear others will confirm they are bad or not good enough.



Tip of the Iceberg (Coping behaviours)

Many children have often developed a range of unhelpful and maladaptive coping behaviours in times of stress. No matter how maladaptive these behaviours may appear, it is important to remember that they have arisen in response to threat and have served a purpose for the child. They force an

Carers have their own shark music as well!

As relationship is dynamic, how we are responding to the child in their desperate struggle will impact how they in turn respond back to us. We all experience moments when we have become frustrated or angry and this has been reflected in our responses back. These are the moments we are likely to dish out harsh consequences, or not be able to resist the invitation to argue back. The fact is, that sometimes it is easy for carers and others working with the child to 'catch' the child's anger as they are so intense in their responses toward us. This is normal, however when we do this we are no longer emotionally present for the child as we are now too angry or frightened ourselves. This is important to recognize. There are times we will need to deal with this first before we will be able to help the child. Children will not calm if they sense the adults are not coping emotionally. They need calmness mirrored back (even if we are feeling something different inside).

Problems with behavioural strategies

Due to the negative impact of coping behaviours, carers are often at their wits end and searching for solutions. Frequently this involves putting in place a range of behavioural strategies aimed at setting limits around the behavior and "teaching the child a lesson!". These are often delivered in harsh or stern tones as the carer is seeking to wrestle control back in a situation that feels out of control. Whilst consequences and limits are important, for children in care they are often problematic and ineffectual when they form the primary target of intervention. Such approaches are based on faulty assumptions that the child is both motivated toward positive connection and also believes they are able to achieve it.

Top of the iceberg behaviours need to be seen as a secondary response to internal hurt and pain. Thus, targeting responses toward addressing the primary hurt will result in less need for the secondary problematic responses to be activated. As the hurt is addressed there will be less need to activate the original coping behavior, and as relationship was where things first went wrong, this is where the focus of intervention needs to be placed.

Underneath the Surface (the core issues)

Underneath the iceberg is the heart of the problem for children who have suffered early trauma and uncertainty. This is where their shame and intense pain is held. Shame is the experience of break in connection and the feeling that you are responsible. In healthy families, children instantly feel shame when they do something that displeases their parents. They do not like this experience, and through this develop insight and empathy into the feelings of others, and motivation to adjust their behaviour in future. In addition, they learn through the help of their parents who quickly repair, that

relationship is enduring and that they can do things in future to avoid these breaks.

In contrast, children raised in abusive homes experience shame that is repeated and intense and does not appear to be linked to their actions in any way. Their parents are rejecting or angry with them at random, regardless of the child's actions (good or bad). The child thus cements a view that they must be intrinsically bad and responsible for what has happened. If they were better, then bad things would not happen to them and their parents would love them more and not abuse them or leave them. Chronic shame experienced in this way cements a strongly negative internal view regarding themselves, others and the world around them (I am bad, unlovable, incapable; others are abusive, untrustworthy, have ulterior motives; the world is unsafe, unpredictable and without hope). As shame is an intensely painful place to be, avoidance becomes the well rehearsed strategy. Thus whenever the child's shark music is activated, top of the iceberg coping strategies instinctively kick in as the risk of having their shame exposed is too real.

At the heart of fostered and adopted children is often an intense fear of being totally abandoned and alone without connection. "If this person knew the real me, they would hate me as much as I do and they would not want me". Somewhat of a paradox, the child may do things to actively push people away rather than risk this discovery of what they believe about themselves. Whilst they crave to be loved and connected, they fear this is not possible and so better to reject first than face the pain of others rejecting them.

Therapeutic care is key to recovery. The child needs to experience unconditional love and acceptance, that problems can be sorted through and that their place in the home is not contingent on them "being good" – they can't be. Once the child feels safe enough and there are supportive relationships in place around them, psychotherapy can be used to target this area underneath the surface. Behavioural strategies in contrast usually target the tip of the iceberg, but do not address the underlying shame and negative internal view of themselves. And so whilst there will still need to be limits and consequences, the primary intervention occurs in cementing the relationship and a child's internal view of themselves – that they are loved and that they are worth it.