

# A Psychological Needs Model of How Negative and Positive Childhood Experiences are Carried Forward Through the Lifespan

By Mercurio Cicchini  
 Clinical Psychologist  
 Perth, Western Australia Email: [mcpsych@tpg.com.au](mailto:mcpsych@tpg.com.au)

## Summary

### Overview

The paper summarised here was presented at an International Conference in Prato, Italy on September 8, 2009. The Conference, “*Children and the Law: International approaches to children and their vulnerabilities*” was hosted by Monash University.

The presentation introduced a psychological model explaining how positive and negative childhood experiences are carried forward into adulthood. The model identifies important psychological needs and describes the processes whereby when needs are met during development, individuals tend to develop resilience, confidence, and wellbeing – all of which are associated with positive core beliefs. When needs are thwarted through neglect, trauma, or misadventure, the resulting emotional pain is recorded in memory and persist as vulnerabilities that influence personality, motivation, relationships, and behaviour across the lifespan – and are reflected in enduring negative core beliefs about oneself or the world, and as attributions (explanations, and predictions) regarding adverse events.

### Why Childhood Experiences Matter

Compared to other species humans have a long period of dependency on external care before maturation and the development of autonomy. Experiences during childhood are encoded emotionally, mentally, and bodily. Sensitive caregiving which is responsive to a child's manifested need allows distress to be transformed into feelings of comfort, safety, trust and confidence, while repeated frustration, or intense distress from trauma, lead to internal tensions and upsets recorded in memory which persists as an enduring vulnerability that can be re-aroused in adult life by relevant stresses.

### Psychological Needs as Motivational Force

Psychological needs are experienced primarily through the emotional system. Behaviour is strongly motivated by efforts to reduce emotional pain or restore emotional balance, and reduce threats and distress. When needs are satisfied, positive feelings follows; when frustrated, negative feelings intensify. When through trauma or neglect the resultant negative feeling exceeds a critical level of intensity, a cataclysmic adaptation can result involving the recording in memory of feelings and beliefs that try to protect or shield the individual from a recurrence in the future. These are referred to as negative affective attributions (emotion-based negative core beliefs).

### How Unmet Psychological Needs Become Enduring Structures

Trauma or recurring need-frustration lead to the formation of linked emotional and cognitive structures which are referred to as schemas (*negative affective attributions*): intense negative affect paired with core beliefs about the self and/or world which attempt to provide an explanation of the cause, and which serve to try to avert a recurrence of the distress experienced. These structures operate automatically, largely outside of awareness, and their contents guide perception, motivation, and behaviour.

### **Activation in Adulthood**

These structures in memory can be reactivated by negative adult situations that resemble earlier experiences of need-frustration.

Automatic thoughts, rules and conditional beliefs in the stream of consciousness are byproducts of these mental structures, as are a variety of preferences and inclinations that form essential aspects of an individual's personality not attributable to genetics. Activation may produce vulnerabilities associated with intense emotional reactions, habitual coping behaviours, and physiological stress responses which bear a relationship to, and can rekindle, the original feelings created by trauma or need-frustration.

### **Important Psychological Needs**

Key needs include: acceptance; safety/security; succourance (the need for affection and physical touch); competence; esteem; approval; autonomy; control/power; affiliation; attention; admiration; recognition; order; stimulation; understanding; and nurturance. These encompass the **categories** of attachment and security needs, dependency needs, and agency needs (the latter is inclusive of understanding, autonomy and competence). All remain relevant across the lifespan, as when such needs are thwarted in adults, stress results, and wellbeing is produced when they are gratified. In persons who experienced childhood adversity the carryover of the motivational and perceptual biases inherent in their experiences have an increased propensity to be triggered and to interfere with normal decision-making and functioning. That is because the adult environment is unconsciously misperceived as being the same, or a very similar, threat to that which produced the original trauma.

### **Manifestations of Unmet Needs**

Unmet needs may appear as negative beliefs and associated mental and behavioural rules, intense emotional states, maladaptive behaviours, or stress-related physiological symptoms. Thoughts in the stream of consciousness that explain past, or predict future, adverse events can often point to needs thwarted in childhood, as can fantasies, or recurring negative feelings. For example, feelings of *shame* points to an unmet childhood need for approval (as from criticism), *unworthiness* to esteem. [*Unmet psychological needs in adults can be detected by appropriate psychometric tests, which has led to insights about causal factors in the sexual abuse of children by adults - see [www.PreventingChildSexualAbuse.org](http://www.PreventingChildSexualAbuse.org)*]

### **Links to Psychopathology**

Anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and most antisocial behaviour can be understood as expressions, or consequences of, unmet childhood psychological needs. [*In a webinar on YouTube posted by Therapyroute in 2025 I mention a few examples of the unmet psychological needs in some adult personality disorders*].

Social anxiety can emanate from unmet needs for acceptance; physical harm anxiety from unmet safety/security needs in infancy or childhood. Indeed a number of adults seen in therapy suffering from panic attacks had histories of maternal separation in their early life.

Often, violent acting out is the result of the activation of pain or distress from childhood adversity being aroused by current (adult) stress. The research and clinical data base in Psychology has consistently demonstrated that childhood trauma and neglect are the basic drivers of domestic and other violence, and various manifestations of mental ill-health.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Psychological needs are experienced emotionally before they stimulate the formation of core beliefs about their perceived cause.

- Unmet childhood needs result in emotional pain stored in memory.
- This pain becomes linked with core beliefs, automatic thoughts, and conditional beliefs that guide adult behaviour.
- Many psychological symptoms represent attempts to reduce or avoid this pain, or a re-living of the pain recorded in memory.
- Early, need-attuned caregiving which fulfil the psychological needs of children is central to prevention.

### **Illustrative Case Examples**

#### *Case 1: Thwarted Competence and Acting-Out*

A man with a long history of offending displayed intense sensitivity to feeling incompetent. In childhood, he was repeatedly criticised and labelled as incapable by a parent. In adulthood, situations that evoked similar feelings triggered impulsive behaviours aimed at restoring a sense of competence or superiority. While these actions temporarily relieved emotional pain, they became habitual and reinforced his difficulties.

#### *Case 2: Autonomy Violations and Rebellious Behaviour*

Another individual reacted with disproportionate anger and impulsive acting-out on multiple occasions when advised or directed by others, and was non-compliant with legal restrictions that limited his authority to drive. The rebellious activities functioned as attempts to preserve autonomy, and were over-reactions to perceived intrusions or requests which others without that type of childhood history would be able to readily accommodate.

#### *Case 3: Rejection, Succourance, and Relationship Instability*

A woman with a history of unstable relationships experienced intense fear of abandonment and jealousy. A childhood incident in which a caregiver rejected her need for comfort and reassurance when she was injured became central to her belief that she was unimportant. Adult relationships repeatedly reactivated this emotional structure, contributing to volatility, alcohol use, and self-harm.

### **Core Message**

Behind unmet psychological needs lies pain. This pain can be transmitted across and between generations unless understood and addressed – or better still, prevented. By elucidating the basic needs of children that require fulfilment the model offers an optimistic framework for healing, prevention, and the promotion of wellbeing.

**NOTE: The complete paper, References, and handout to participants are available upon request. An updated (2025) list and description of important psychological needs are included.**

**Suggestions for how knowledge about the effects of adverse childhood experiences can be applied in improving childcare practices, and to offer guidance and support to adults with adverse childhood experience to manage upsets that can contribute to violence are detailed in the article, “Addressing the causes of violence” in my recent media release on domestic violence: <https://getthewordout.com.au/press-release/press-release-the-way-forward-in-domestic-violence-prevention-in-australia/>**

### **Acknowledgement**

The author acknowledges and values the pioneering work of Psychologists **Henry Murray and colleagues** whose work “*Explorations in Personality*” (1938; republished 2008) foreshadowed the voluminous findings since in the field of developmental psychopathology regarding the important factors in childhood that shape personality, wellbeing, and behavioural or emotional disturbances in children, adolescents and adults.