Childhood First
healing hurt minds
40 years pioneering success

transforming young lives
working with traumatised children

Integrated Systemic Therapy
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our vision
is of a world in which there is an abundance of healthy relationships, so that each child may have the love that they need, from family, parents and communities, to develop and grow happily and safely.

our mission
is to enable children and young people to recover from severe relational trauma, to enjoy life and to achieve their potential; we do this through the provision of therapeutic residential care, treatment and education, together with family and network support.

our approach
is 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 and young people with severe emotional and behavioural disturbance. We also provide support to their networks of adult carers.

From pioneering beginnings in 1970, with the formation of our first therapeutic community for young people, and subsequently at Peper Harow (founded 1973, closed 1993) and Thornby Hall (founded 1986), we have continued to refine our treatment method and to offer it more widely, with the development of:

- further residential facilities using the same Integrated Systemic Therapy method, with variations to suit age group and size of facility – currently, Greenfields House and School, Earthsea House and Merrywood House;

- a Placement and Family Support service which works with networks supporting children in families, foster placements and residential placements.
Integrated Systemic Therapy (IST)*

Childhood First’s therapeutic method has evolved over forty years. 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 affected 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 is 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+.

outcomes

IST creates an effective therapeutic community within which traumatised children and young people can live and learn. IST:

- heals a disturbed and fragmented sense of self
- teaches how to make healthy relationships
- enables growing, enjoying and achieving
- builds supportive relationships amongst children and adults which can last a lifetime.

It has proved to be uniquely effective, as evidenced in the summary statistics about our intake and outcomes presented below.

**Every child who comes to us has a story to tell**
- 89% disclose serious abuse or neglect
- 39% victims of sexual abuse
- 78% victims of domestic violence
- 57% parents or carers involved in drug or alcohol misuse
- 50% parents or carers with psychiatric disorder or mental illness

**Every child communicates their distress**
- 84% behavioural or conduct disorders
- 44% hyperactivity or attention disorders
- 90% emotional and related symptoms
- 48% unboundaried sexual behaviour
- 26% of 13-18 year olds previously accommodated in psychiatric units

**Every child has a disrupted family history**
- 63% not in contact with birth mother
- 78% not in contact with birth father
- 36% in foster care
- 30% more than seven changes of placement – some had over 40 different placements in a year.

**Every child has a disrupted education**
- 51% permanently or temporarily excluded from school
- 19% never attended any educational provision
- 55% Statement of Special Educational Needs.
Closing the gap

The following outcomes are substantially better than those achieved by the national cohort of looked after children, and in some cases are similar to the mainstream non-looked after population. Thus IST narrows, and in some cases, closes the developmental gap caused by the effects of severe relational trauma.

**Average length of placement 24.3 months**

**Educational attainment at 16+**
- 96% achieved 1 or more GCSE pass
- 65% achieved 4 or more GCSE passes
- 35% achieved 6-9 GCSE passes
- 0% children excluded from school

**Employment, training, FE at 18+**
- 87% went on to full-time employment, training or further education

**Independent living at 18+**
- 58% went on to independent living accommodation
- 32% entered semi-independent or supported living
- 0% became homeless
- 0% went on to bed and breakfast accommodation

We are immensely proud of the progress made by all of the children and young people who spend time with us. We hope that you will agree that the results achieved by the dedication of our staff, and the effectiveness of our therapeutic method, are outstanding.
therapeutic education

At each of our facilities, we aim to provide not only first-class therapeutic care and treatment for traumatised children and young people, 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. Most have formal Statements of Educational Needs. At our schools, however, children are never excluded, and 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. Living in community, the success experienced at each stage by older peers provides a sense of hope which is crucial to the younger children.

The cognitive development of children who have suffered early life emotional trauma is impaired, indeed often partially arrested at the time associated with the trauma. Children and young people often come to us with diagnoses of cognitive disabilities which are found in the longer term to be incorrect. When the emotional trauma is effectively treated, the child’s cognitive abilities are free to develop, and rapid progress can be made.

Traumatised children and young people need a therapeutic education – an education which 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 ensures that this is provided.

Accordingly, at each one of our homes and their linked schools, we think together at all times about the particular emotional and cognitive needs of each child and young person. We have our own Registered Special Schools at Thornby Hall and at Greenfields House, and we work in partnership with the on-site Norfolk Local Authority Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) at Earthsea House and Merrywood House.

We provide expert help in the transition from special school or PRU to mainstream school or college, where appropriate. Where children have moved on to mainstream school or to further education, we provide continuing support and work closely with the school or college which they are attending.

Each school follows the National Curriculum, but offers differentiated individual programmes of learning tailored to the needs of each child and young person.

We have specialist educational psychologists consulting to us, to help diagnose and address specific learning difficulties.
ages 12-19

Thornby Hall

Thornby Hall is a beautiful seventeenth century manor house situated in rural Northamptonshire with 17 acres of grounds including a lake. It is a therapeutic community with nearly 25 years’ experience of providing residential care, special education and family support to young people aged twelve to eighteen.
We specialise in the treatment of young people who present severe emotional and behavioural problems, as a result of attachment difficulties usually rooted in early life trauma.

Through the use of our unique Integrated Systemic Therapy, which focuses on healing trauma and enabling healthy attachments and relationships, young people achieve exceptional outcomes in every aspect of their lives. We have consistently been judged as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ in statutory inspections.

Our staff are highly trained to enable young people to work through their experiences of past trauma in a safe and containing environment designed for group living and learning. We provide a strong group-based culture which helps young people engage with their difficulties, and support one another in recovering and achieving their potential.

We aim to create a therapeutic environment in which we work with the young people enabling them to live together, learn and develop. We place much emphasis on caring and thoughtful relationships and creating a sense of belonging.

**Education at Thornby**

Thornby’s school offers the full National Curriculum, with a wide range of arts and crafts, sporting opportunities, educational trips and extra-curricular activities. Classes are small, enabling individual attention. Thornby’s high standards were noted in its recent Ofsted inspection. In particular, the following aspects of provision at Thornby were considered ‘excellent’:

- the quality of relationships
- provision to help children to achieve and enjoy what they do.

Many young people from Thornby go on to further education, and some to university. Of the 2007 leavers, for example, all have achieved successes at
appropriate levels, including one young person who has received unconditional offers from a number of universities, and another who has secured a place on a prestigious course that provides technical staff for motor racing teams.

**Families and Networks**
Each young person has a Keyworker, who is also able to support appropriate members of their family and network to the extent that this helps the young person in their recovery.

When it is time for a young person to leave care, the Keyworker helps the young person, and appropriate family and network members, to think together as far as this is possible, and to plan each step.

We are able to tailor the placement and family support that we provide to each young person and their circumstances.

**Leaving Care**
All young people have a leaving care plan. We have a Semi-Independent Unit on site where young people can spend time and experience what it is like to live apart from the community and to find their own solutions to everyday problems. We have a comprehensive Life Skills Programme and a Leavers Group which enables the young person to discuss issues around independence and leaving.

We work closely with Local Authorities to plan the transition for a young person and we always offer an extended after-care package for all young people leaving Thornby, no matter where a young person is placed.

Nearly every young person who leaves Thornby Hall remains in education, either progressing to college and sometimes university or finding employment. Young people are invited back to Thornby for Feasts twice a year. Many young people stay in touch and keep us informed about their successes and difficulties.

**Referral Process**

1. Initial telephone conversation to result in request for relevant documentation, such as: detailed chronology, psychological/psychiatric reports and copy of statement of SEN etc.
2. Visit to Thornby Hall for all parties professionally involved with the young person, to consider all aspects of placement.
3. If all agree to proceed, a member of our referrals team will visit the young person.
4. The young person visits Thornby Hall and meets the Director, staff and other young people.
5. The young person phones the Director, at a time agreed on the visit, to confirm their personal wish to move to Thornby Hall.
6. Arrival date agreed with all parties.
Greenfields House

Greenfields House is a large detached Edwardian house with an extensive garden situated in a rural location near the village of Biddenden in the heart of Kent.

We provide therapeutic residential care, treatment, special education and family support to a group of up to ten children aged between five and thirteen years old, with provision for therapeutic education for a further five day children.

We specialise in the treatment of children who present severe emotional and behavioural problems, including abnormally sexualised behaviour, as a result of attachment difficulties usually rooted in early life trauma.

Through the use of our unique Integrated Systemic Therapy, which focuses on healing trauma and enabling healthy attachments and relationships, children achieve exceptional outcomes in every aspect of their lives. We have consistently been commended for the quality of our provision in statutory inspections.
Our staff are highly trained to enable children to work through their experiences of past trauma in a safe and comfortable environment designed for group living and learning. We combine individual therapy with a strong group-based culture which helps children engage with their difficulties, and support one another in recovering and achieving their potential.

We aim to create a therapeutic environment in which we work with the children enabling them to live together, learn and heal. We place much emphasis on caring and thoughtful relationships and creating a sense of belonging.

**Education at Greenfields**

Greenfields offers the full National Curriculum, with sporting opportunities, educational trips, and a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Classes are small, allowing individual attention for each child.

At Greenfields’ most recent inspection, a number of areas of provision were singled out as noteworthy:

- a comprehensive induction programme for each child
- learning opportunities are created that allow for the possibility of return to mainstream schools
- positive relationships between staff and children
- excellent liaison with local mainstream schools.

Strong links have been established with Medway education authority, enabling day pupils to attend the school, along with the children resident at Greenfields House.

**Families and Networks**

Our dedicated Placement and Family Support worker is available to support the whole family and network of each child in our care. Working together, we aim to promote the recovery of both the child and, where possible, the family.

Where a child’s next placement is fostering or adoption, we work closely with all concerned to prepare the child and the family, and to ensure that the fostering or adoption placement is a success.

When it is time for a child to move on, the Placement and Family Support worker helps the family and network think and plan each step. Some children may continue with part of their treatment: staying on at school, continuing with therapy and family support at home, for example. Others may move on completely, but may need a more intensive package of support. We are able to tailor what we provide to each individual.

**Referral Process**

1. Initial telephone conversation to result in request for relevant documentation, such as, detailed chronology, psychological/psychiatric reports and copy of statement of SEN etc.

2. Visit to Greenfields to be arranged for all parties concerned with child to consider all aspects of placement

3. If all agree to proceed, Director to visit child

4. Child to visit Greenfields and meet both staff and children.

5. Arrival date to be agreed.
ages 5-16

Earthsea House and Merrywood House

Earthsea House is based in a rural village north-west of Norwich. The facility was established in partnership with Norfolk Local Authority. The house is purpose-built, with a particularly attractive interior, every part of which was designed with children in mind. It is situated within the landscaped grounds of the old village school. Merrywood House is half a mile down the lane in a fine, spacious property, with a large garden.
Both facilities provide therapeutic, care, treatment and education, Earthsea for eight children between the ages of five and twelve years, and Merrywood for a further four children from age ten upwards.

Both Earthsea and Merrywood specialise in the treatment of children who present severe emotional and behavioural problems, including abnormally sexualised behaviour, as a result of attachment difficulties usually rooted in early life trauma.

Through the use of our unique Integrated Systemic Therapy, which focuses on healing trauma and enabling healthy attachments and relationships, children achieve exceptional outcomes in every aspect of their lives. We have consistently been commended for the quality of our provision in statutory inspections.

Our staff are highly trained to enable children to work through their experiences of past trauma in a safe and comfortable environment designed for group living and learning. We provide a strong group-based culture which helps children engage with their difficulties, and support one another in recovering and achieving their potential.

We aim to create a therapeutic environment in which we work with the children enabling them to live together, learn and heal. We place much emphasis on caring and thoughtful relationships, and creating a sense of belonging.

As a result, we deliver exceptional outcomes for the children in our care, enabling them to manage their next placements with less disruption and distress.

Education at Earthsea and Merrywood
Earthsea PRU offers the full National Curriculum, with small classes allowing individual attention for each child. The Earthsea PRU was singled out for particular praise, at a recent Norfolk PRU inspection. Childhood First works closely with Norfolk County Council colleagues to ensure that the complex emotional and cognitive needs of all Earthsea House and Merrywood House pupils are met within the PRU, as within the children’s homes.

Families and Networks
Our ability to work closely to support families, the professional network, and the Local Authority, has led to a number of our children being able to live within their own or another family setting. The strength of our relationship with the Local Authority has been identified by HM Government as a model of excellence in corporate parenting.

Referral Process
All referrals come through Norfolk Children’s Services.
families and networks

**Placement and Family Support Service**
Where a child referred to us has a relationship with members of birth or foster families, we work closely with family members to facilitate and support these relationships and their recovery if they have been damaged or are damaging.

Our specialist Placement and Family Support service works with children and their families, both children resident in our therapeutic facilities, and also children who are not resident with us. We have 40 years experience of providing tailor-made therapeutic support to children who have complex needs and complex family networks.

We seek to work closely with the entire network of external adults who play significant roles in the lives of children with whom we work, because such work is an important factor in each child’s recovery.

**Working with families and carers**
It is often our experience that family systems have evolved in a way that ‘elects’ the children and young people referred to our facilities to represent and conduct themselves as a problem on behalf of the family.

As the child becomes more securely attached within a therapeutic relationship, or within one of our therapeutic communities, and the pattern and meaning of their behaviour is elucidated, a wider dysfunction within their family becomes apparent. Our Placement and Family Support service is designed to provide dedicated support in these circumstances. We seek to work with families and carers in a way that enables the whole familial system to benefit.

**Corporate parenting**
Where appropriate, we endeavour to make our emerging understanding of the child and its family available to the professional networks who are working alongside us with the child and his/her family or carers. Such joint working greatly improves the possibility of good outcomes for the child. Good corporate parenting results from the relevant adults spending time together making sense of the children and the surrounding systems. When adults think together in this way, it is empowering for children; when we do not, it is disconcerting and demoralising for them.
Permission to recover

Working with the wider network of social workers, teachers and psychiatrists, alongside the family, allows all aspects of the system which holds the child in suffering to be considered and addressed.

Where we are able to engage successfully with a family and the surrounding systems in this way, the child will, more often than not, be able to relinquish psychiatric diagnoses and prescribed medication, move forward to recovery, and take up opportunities for educational, social and personal development.
assessment and consultation

Assessment

The need for assessment
Effective treatment of children and young people (hereinafter ‘children’) 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 service.

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. 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 psychological 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. The child in relationship with another is the most valuable source of assessment. 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; social 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 our residential centre which serves the appropriate age group.

Consultation
In addition to providing residential treatment centres and a specialist Placement and Family Support service, we also consult to and facilitate external professionals and organisations in:
- The management and organisation of group-based and network-based child care and treatment.
- Group-based and network-based staff and carer support.

Further details
For further details, please contact the Chief Executive:
Email: s.blunden@childhoodfirst.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7593 1310
professional
development
and training

We offer all of our therapeutic staff a pioneering work-based training in Psychosocial Care, which includes both theoretical and practical elements, to equip them to care for and treat severely traumatised children and young people.

All of the work in our residential centres is underpinned by this formal training programme. The training courses may also be made available to other selected providers, who can demonstrate that they share the commitment and capacity to support a training based on strong clinical, ethical and social values.

The various courses which make up the training programme provide an education in these values, together with the clinical understanding and practical skills necessary to meet the children and young peoples’ needs, and the requirements of all relevant national occupational standards.

The programme was developed in collaboration with the Tavistock Clinic and Middlesex University, and it is validated by Middlesex University.

The initial Psychosocial Practice Module has been developed to include a reflective piece of writing, which allows the student to be awarded a Certificate in Psychosocial Care. This module covers all the aspects required by the National Minimum Care
Course structure

Standards during the six months induction or foundation training for residential child care staff.

Subsequent modules lead to the Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Psychosocial Care, from which students can go on to our advanced training programmes for senior practitioners:

- The MA/Post-Graduate Diploma/Post-Graduate Certificate in Psychosocial Care
- The Advanced Diploma in Psychosocial Care Leadership and Management.

The training cross-references with competencies required within National Occupational Standards and NVQs for Health and Social Care, and also with the statutory Registered Managers’ award. Our certificate course incorporates Children’s Workforce Development Council induction standards and the Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children’s Workforce.

Further details
For further details, please contact the Training Administrator:
Telephone: 020 7928 7388.
contacts

**Head Office**
Partnerships Director  
Childhood First  
Station House  
150 Waterloo Road  
London SE1 8SB  
Tel: 020 7928 7388

**Thornby Hall**
Assistant Director, Referrals  
Thornby Hall  
Naseby Road  
Thornby  
Northants NN6 8SW  
Tel: 01604 740 001

**Greenfields House and School**
Director, Greenfields House and School  
Greenfields  
Biddenden Road  
Tenterden  
Kent TN30 6TD  
Tel: 01580 292 144

**Earthsea House and Merrywood House**
Director, Earthsea and Merrywood  
Earthsea House  
Berrys Lane  
Honingham  
Norfolk NR9 5AX  
Tel: 01603 882 414