

Reaching and Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma

The Institute for Childhood Education
Dr. Barbara Sorrels

Definition of Trauma

- ▶ Anything that undermines a child's perceived sense of psychological or emotional safe
- ▶ An event or circumstance that overwhelms a child's capacity to cope

What are traumatic experiences?

- > Domestic Violence
- > Prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol
- > Toxic stress in pregnancy
- > Abuse
- > Neglect
- > Sexual abuse
- > Abandonment
- > Divorce
- > Poverty
- > Adoption
- > Difficult birth
- > Early medical trauma
- > Foster care
- > Witnessing violence
- > Catastrophic injury
- > Bullying
- > Violent neighborhoods

Why is trauma in the first three years the most toxic?

- ▶ Implicit memory
 - Emotional
 - Procedural
- ▶ Explicit
 - Declarative
 - Autobiographical



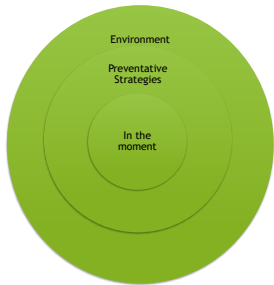
Early trauma is embedded in the biology of the child.

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| Unsafe | Safe |
| ▶ Voice of Dad | ▶ African American male |
| ▶ Yelling | ▶ Ice cream shop |
| ▶ Mustache | |

Impact of Trauma on Development: A Multi-system Failure

- ▶ Brain development
- ▶ Attachment
- ▶ Self Regulation
- ▶ Social Skills
- ▶ Sensory Processing
- ▶ Learning





Trauma Responsive Schools

Environment

► Felt safety

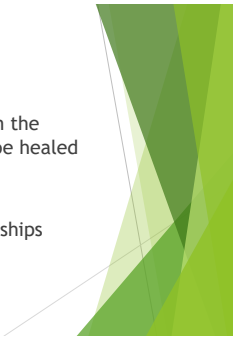
- I can have a “safe” environment without children “feeling safe”
- The emotional tone of the classroom is the “essence” of an early childhood program

Felt Safety

- Safety is found in a relationship with a warm, responsive and consistent adult—who you are matters!!
- An environment can be “safe” without feeling safe
- Predictable routines and thoughtfully planned transitions

Relationships

- ▶ Children who have been harmed in the context of relationships can only be healed in the context of relationships
- ▶ A school is a laboratory of relationships



Attunement

- I see you...
- I hear you...
- I understand you...



How do we build relationships?

- ▶ Eye contact
- ▶ Subtly mimic
- ▶ Hold children in mind
- ▶ Touch
- ▶ Rhythmic movement



“Intensive Care”

- ▶ Our most disorganized and dysregulated children need to be in the “intensive care” unit
- ▶ The disorganized child needs the density of relationships and touch as an infant
Dr. Bruce Perry



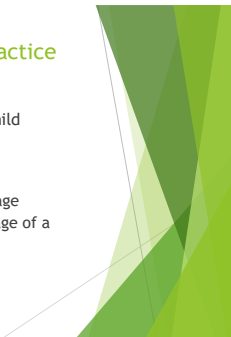
Sense of Belonging

- ▶ “I’m looking for you”
- ▶ Children’s work on the wall
- ▶ Photos
- ▶ Take interests seriously
- ▶ Daily news
- ▶ Group games



Developmentally Appropriate Practice

- ▶ Age Appropriate—we must understand child development
- ▶ Individually appropriate
 - Function at half of their chronological age
 - We must respect the developmental stage of a child
- ▶ Culturally appropriate



Foundations of Learning



Relevant curriculum that helps children make meaning of their world

- ▶ We cannot see them as empty slates ready to be filled with a plethora of disjointed facts and skills
- ▶ We must create conceptually rich curriculum that helps children make sense of their world

Preventative strategies

- ▶ Set children up for success

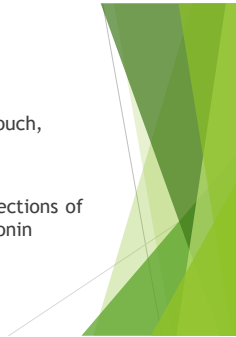
Rhythmic Environment—Why?

- ◆ The brainstem organizes around rhythm—the heartbeat of mom
- ◆ The vast majority of the organization of the brainstem happens in utero and in the first 2 months of life



The power of rhythm

- ▶ Patterned, repetitive, rhythmic touch, sound and movement
- ▶ Out of the brain stem comes projections of dopamine, epinephrine and serotonin



Why rhythm?

- ▶ The brain organizes around the heartbeat of mom in utero
- ▶ Rhythm harkens back to the earliest moment when rhythm was associated with a sense of warmth and well being



Why rhythm?

- ▶ Singing, dancing, chanting, playing instruments together fosters “limbic resonance”

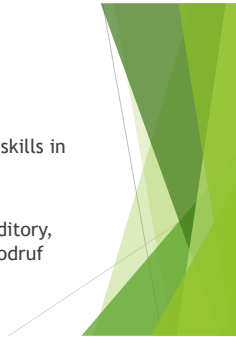
▶ Bessel Van Der Kolk



Why Rhythm?

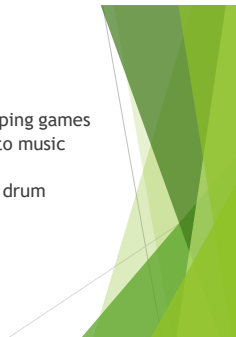
- ▶ Beat synchronization and motor coordination improves regulatory skills in preschool children.

- ▶ There are shared networks for auditory, motor and speech processing (Woodruff 2016)



Rhythm

- ▶ Singing
- ▶ Group games
- ▶ Songs
- ▶ Fingerplays
- ▶ Rhythm band instruments
- ▶ Rhythm sticks
- ▶ Hand clapping games
- ▶ Marching to music
- ▶ Dancing
- ▶ Gathering drum



Touch

- ▶ Intentional—hugs, high fives, handshakes and fist bumps
- ▶ Accidental—parachute, rhythmic hand clapping, singing games, movement



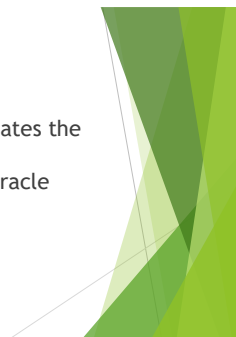
Empathy

- ▶ Check in with band aids
- ▶ Dramatic play



Movement

- ▶ Gross motor movement stimulates the produce of the “brain derived neutropic factor” which is miracle grow for the brain



Errorless learning

Mistakes are opportunities for teaching

- ▶ Behavioral rehearsals
- ▶ Scripted stories
- ▶ Personna dolls
- ▶ Role playing
- ▶ Puppet practice



Short Term Memory

- ▶ Play memory games
- ▶ Use picture cues



Modulation

- ▶ Volume
- ▶ Intensity
- ▶ Speed of movement



Impulse Control

- ▶ Simon says
- ▶ “The challenge”
- ▶ Musical experiences



Imagination

- ▶ Imagination is crucial to hope
- ▶ I must be able to imagine a different future in order to have hope
- ▶ Dramatic play, art, construction



Learn to tolerate new sensations

- ▶ Calming activities
- ▶ Yoga



Focused attention

- ▶ Play based learning
- ▶ Very limited technology—does not facilitate the kind of focused attention that is needed to learn in the classroom



Self Awareness

- ▶ Identify emotions
- ▶ Change view of self from unworthy to worthy of love and care
- ▶ Aware of personal needs, interests, opinions and preferences



Give Children a Voice

- ▶ Drama
- ▶ Art
- ▶ Pursuit of personal interests



In the moment strategies

- Do over's
- Ignore the no and give two yeses
- Focus on problem solving
- Offer a drink or a healthy snack



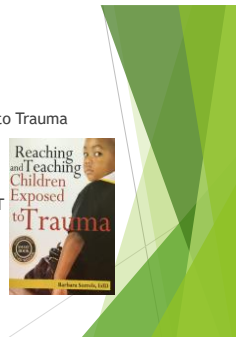
Imagination

- ▶ Minimal technology
- ▶ Imagination is necessary for hope to flourish and imagine a better future
- ▶ The arts



Resources

- ▶ Reaching and Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma
- ▶ Ready or Not Here Comes School
Dr. Barbara Sorrels
- ▶ Nurturing Healthy Attachment
Cathy Chalmers LPC, NCC, LMFT
Dr. Barbara Sorrels



www.weeducateteachers.com
