Reaching and Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma

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Definition of Trauma

- Anything that undermines a child’s perceived sense of psychological or emotional safety
- 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
- Voice of Dad
- Yelling
- Mustache

Safe
- African American male
- Ice cream shop

Impact of Trauma on Development: A Multi-system Failure

- Brain development
- Attachment
- Self Regulation
- Social Skills
- Sensory Processing
- Learning
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 (Woodruf 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

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