Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Behavior

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Trauma-informed practice
You need to know:
• Yourself
• What trauma is
• The effects of trauma on a child’s brain development
• How trauma affects behavior and learning
• How to change your methods of responding to and interacting with children when they engage in disruptive, challenging behavior

Creating a trauma-informed classroom can benefit all children
Think about how you are feeling whether or not you are closed due to the coronavirus

“Trauma results from an event or series of events that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

SAMHSA
Recognizing your own stress level

• Be aware of triggers
• Some signs of stress
  – Feeling tired and wired at the same time
  – Being jumpy and hypervigilant
  – Feeling inexplicably irritable, angry, or numb
  – Being unable to focus or concentrate
  – Feeling anxious or unsafe
  – Feeling guilty about not doing enough
  – Being unable to sleep and having nightmares
  – Overeating or eating too little
  – Having physical ailments

When challenging behavior occurs, you need to be:

• Powerfully present
• Emotionally responsive
• A role model of healthy social and emotional behavior
Teaching young children is emotionally demanding work

Secondary trauma stress (STS)

• Being jumpy and hypervigilant
• Withdrawing from friends and family
• Feeling inexplicably irritable, angry, or numb
• Being unable to focus or concentrate
• Feeling anxious or unsafe
• Feeling helpless or isolated or guilty about not doing enough
• Losing self-confidence and feeling incompetent
• Being unable to sleep and having nightmares
• Overeating or eating too little
• Having physical ailments
• Either avoiding children who’ve experienced trauma or worrying continually about them, even when at home
• If you experienced trauma as a child or teenager you will probably be more vulnerable to STS

• It is not a sign of weakness or incompetence - “It is the cost of caring”

• It’s important to build your resilience

It starts with you

• Self-regulation is your most valuable asset
  – Prevents your negative emotions from triggering a child’s stress response and intensifying his/her challenging behavior
  – Helps the child learn to tolerate his/her own uneasy feelings and eventually to take charge of them him/herself
If you have children at home

Focus on washing hands properly
Set up virtual playdates
Spend extra time playing with your children
Create a cozy, safe retreat
Expect behavioral issues and respond gently
Focus on safety and attachment
Avoid social media and COVID conversation around children
Go outside, run with them

What does being resilient mean?

Resilience is about survival and growth
• Bouncing back from a terrible event
• Having strength to cope
• Being determined to see things through to the end
• Being mentally strong
• Maintaining a sense of well-being when facing adversity
Building your resilience

Build on your protective factors
• Make connections - find social support
• Self-esteem - nurture a positive view of yourself
• Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems
• Accept that change is a part of living
• Look for opportunities for self-discovery
• Set realistic goals
• Take decisive actions
• Maintain a hopeful outlook
• Take care of yourself

Dealing with the here and now

• Stick to a routine
• Go for a walk
• Maintain social contact
• Understand those around you
• Limit social media/TV around COVID19
• Counter-balance the heavy information with the hopeful information
• Do something you never feel you have the time to do
• Reach out for help
• Help others
• Remind yourself daily that this is temporary

(Eileen Feliciano)
Resilience in stressful circumstances

• You will be able to:
  – cope better with the emotional demands of stressful encounters
  – accurately perceive and appraise the emotions of others
  – help children express their feelings
  – encourage the building of trusting and cooperative relationships
  – effectively support children’s ability to self-regulate

Resilient adults… build resilient children

Devereux Center for Resilient Children
Trauma/toxic stress can harm children for life

46 percent of American children have experienced at least one serious traumatic event

Stress is not always detrimental

• *Positive stress* is mild or brief
  – A supportive adult can help the child learn to adapt and recover from the situation and gain a sense of mastery and control

• *Tolerable stress*—
  – Has the potential to harm
  – A supportive adult can buffer its effects and enable the child to cope
• **BIOLOGICAL RISK FACTORS**
  - Genes
  - Temperament
  - Complications of pregnancy and birth
  - Substance abuse during pregnancy
  - Neurological delays
  - Emotional and behavioral disorders
  - Gender

• **ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS**
  - Family factors and parenting style
  - Poverty and the social conditions surrounding it
  - Trauma (ACES)
  - Cultural dissonance
  - Peers

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CDC A.C.E. Study

[Diagram showing the pyramid of childhood experiences, from Adverse childhood experiences to Early Death, with steps including Social emotional & Cognitive impairments and Disrupted neurodevelopment.]
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

- A traumatic event causes physical, emotional, or psychological distress or harm
- Alters brain architecture
- Delays development of Executive Functions

https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean
**Trauma**

It is an event that is perceived as a threat to one’s safety or to the stability of one’s world

- **Acute trauma**
  - Single exposure to an overwhelming event such as natural and human-caused disasters

- **Complex Trauma**
  - Occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, usually over a period of time and within specific relationships and contexts

- **Historical trauma**
  - Events that are so widespread as to affect an entire culture; such events also have effects intense enough to influence generations of the culture beyond those who experienced them directly

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**Trauma and family violence**

- Hearing or observing acts of violence against their mothers, siblings, pets or extended family
- Being directly assaulted or threatened with violence or death to themselves or others
- Living in an atmosphere pervaded by overwhelming fear and stress, even if the violent parent is no longer present
- Having their possessions destroyed
- Being locked in or out
- Being forced to keep silent
- Observing injuries in the aftermath of assault and taking responsibility to call police ambulance or other sources of help
Disaster’s effect and toxic stress/trauma

• Children impacted by disaster may
  – be more likely to drop out of school
  – engage in risky or illegal behaviors
  – be 5 times more likely to suffer from emotional and mental health issues
• The impact may not appear immediately
• Recovering from a disaster is a long process

Poverty and toxic stress/trauma

• Living with continual food or housing insecurity in childhood can turn stress toxic especially when these experiences are not buffered by a consistent, responsive adult

• A child who lives in a poor family is likely to have significantly higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol and perform less well on executive function tests
Homelessness as trauma

- A staggering 5 million children and their families are now homeless in America

- This represents one in every 30 children

Do you know if you have any children who have at least one family member in prison in your group?
Children of Parents in Prison

Millions of US children have experienced one parent serving time
• Averaging one in 14 children
• One in 9 children of color
• Almost 3 times as likely for children living in poverty

Historical Trauma

“A constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations.” (NAEYC Draft Position Paper, 2018)

• Colonization
• Genocide
• Slavery
• Sexual exploitation
• Forced relocation/incarceration based on race or ethnicity
Historical Trauma

School safety drills
Mitigating psychological effects of school shooter drills

• Before drills occur, assure the children that it is a drill, discuss their concerns and provide an orientation
• Recognize that the experience can be traumatizing for any child and a trigger for students who have experienced trauma
• Allow for children who already have experienced trauma to be excused from participating or have very close support before, during and after the drills
• During the drills, emphasize that it is just practice and continuously state the purpose

Early experience influences whether and how a child’s genes are expressed

When toxic stress occurs early in a child’s life, it sparks changes to the genes
  – May activate or deactivate some genes
  – Hinder the higher-level social, emotional, and cognitive competencies from developing their full genetic potential
The importance of attachment

The type of emotional support that a child receives during his/her first three-and-a-half years has an effect on education, social life and romantic relationships even 20 or 30 years later.
A child’s beliefs and feelings

Secure
- Adults are trustworthy and reliable
- Caregivers keep me safe and I can count on them when in need
- Caregivers love me and I feel comfortable with new caregivers
- Caregivers provide comfort when I am upset and help me feel better
- Caregivers are sensitive, predictable and nurturing

Insecure
- Adults are inconsistent and untrustworthy
- Caregivers fail to protect me, so I must rely on myself
- Caregivers leave me, so I keep myself at a distance from new ones
- Caregivers can’t comfort me or help me regulate my feelings
- Caregivers act in frightening and unpredictable ways

Attachment Types and Characteristics

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<th>Attachment Type</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Well adjusted, pleasant&lt;br&gt;Responds well to appropriate authority&lt;br&gt;Responds well to appropriate requests&lt;br&gt;Accepts comfort when hurt or upset&lt;br&gt;Confident, curious&lt;br&gt;Has drive to master his/her world&lt;br&gt;Willing to try new things&lt;br&gt;Able to cope with challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insecure Avoidant</td>
<td>Self sufficient beyond years&lt;br&gt;Uncomfortable accepting help or comfort&lt;br&gt;Appears fearless&lt;br&gt;May seem withdrawn and lack of affect&lt;br&gt;Unexpected meltdowns&lt;br&gt;Blames others when things go wrong&lt;br&gt;May lack empathy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insecure Ambivalent</td>
<td>Demanding and clingy&lt;br&gt;Difficult to soothe&lt;br&gt;Low tolerance for frustration&lt;br&gt;Manipulative uses temper tantrums and crying&lt;br&gt;Aggressive, competitive&lt;br&gt;Poor understanding of others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disorganized*</td>
<td>Lives in constant state of alarm&lt;br&gt;Hyper vigilant&lt;br&gt;Interprets social cues&lt;br&gt;Highly reactive to sensory cues in the environment&lt;br&gt;Displays bizarre or strange behavior&lt;br&gt;Prene to melt downs&lt;br&gt;May vacillate between a hyper aroused state and a withdrawen state&lt;br&gt;Unpredictable behavior</td>
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* Children with a Disorganized Attachment have experienced trauma

Sorrels, B p. 61 (2017)
The impact of toxic stress on brain development

Toxic stress can harm children for life

- The adverse events that evoke the young child’s stress response are intense, frequent, significant, and/or prolonged
- Increased level of hormone cortisol can cause lasting damage
- Difficulty processing emotion, self-regulation, memory and managing stress
The brain knows exactly what to do in a dangerous situation

Understanding a child’s challenging behavior from a trauma-informed perspective
Children who have experienced severe and chronic childhood trauma

- A sudden inability to develop along a “normal” trajectory for age
- Atrophied cognitive functioning
- Regressive behaviors
- Physical response/shock
- Disassociation
- Attachment disturbance

Children who have experienced trauma/toxic stress:

- Increased level of hormone cortisol
  - have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported
  - aren’t trying to push your buttons
  - are in constant overdrive
- You don’t need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017
The cumulative effects of trauma and behavior

- **Infants may:**
  - be difficult to soothe and comfort - resist being held
  - not be interested in playing

- **Toddlers may:**
  - have temper tantrums
  - have difficulty separating
  - be withdrawn or aggressive
  - refuse to be comforted

- **Preschoolers may:**
  - be hypervigilant and aggressive
  - preoccupied with perceived threats
  - be unable to concentrate on anything else
  - have trouble learning, paying attention, processing and retrieving information, and controlling impulses

Trauma and social cognition/processing

Early childhood trauma affects a child’s ability to:

- Recognize their own feelings
- Understand the feelings of others
- Identify social cues
- Accurately perceive the social environment
Toxic stress and executive functions

Children with the abnormal cortisol patterns induced by toxic stress have impaired executive functions

- Are at high risk for aggressive and challenging behavior
- Have trouble sitting still, paying attention, concentrating, and following rules and directions
- Find it hard to:
  - control their impulses, emotions, and behavior
  - communicate their needs and desires in words
  - understand others’ feelings
  - form satisfying relationships
- Tend to lash out at the sign of any threat, whether it’s real or perceived

“When children are oppositional, defensive, numbed out, or enraged, it's also important to recognize that such “bad behavior" may repeat action patterns that were established to survive serious threats even if they are intensely upsetting or off-putting.”

Bessel A. Van der Kolk 2014
The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma p.68
Trauma-informed practice recognizes the impact of toxic stress and trauma, and strives to ensure that all children feel safe, supported, and connected.

A strength-based approach

Trauma isn’t the only thing in the lives of children who’ve experienced it, and it doesn’t define them!

Look for what interests them and what they do well, and incorporate these into the program.
“Children who’ve been harmed in a relationship can only be healed in a relationship.”

Barbara Sorrels (2015)
Reaching & Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma
“Trauma recovery doesn’t come from a specific tool, but from countless interactions with trustworthy, calm, loving and supportive human beings.”

-Louise Godbold, Executive Director, Echo

What can you do?

• Show that you care (unconditionally)
• Separate the child from the behavior
• Recognize and eliminate stress triggers
• Listen
• Don’t take things personally
• Focus on the positive
• Follow your instincts
• Take care of yourself
Prevention is key

- Be consistent
- Provide routines
- Avoid surprises
- Create a caring classroom community
- Teach social skills proactively
- Make sure the environment is not over-stimulating
- Offer choices
- Dramatic, creative and free-play opportunities are important

A paradigm shift

Hard as it may be:

- Respond to the child and his/her behavior with empathy and flexibility.
- Instead of denying feelings, encourage the child to identify and tap into them.
- Instead of asking yourself, “What’s wrong with this child?” start asking “What’s happened to this child?”
Responding to Challenging Behavior From a Trauma Informed Perspective

- Reframe your response
  - Switch internal dialogue from “this kid is driving me nuts” to.... “How can I support him/her?”
- Reinforce efforts to self-regulate
- Respond CONSISTENTLY
- Consequences should be:
  - connected to the problem or behavior
  - immediate, not drawn out
  - given with empathy, not in anger

Trauma-affected children read consistency as “safety”

The importance of non-verbal communication

- A gentle and positive tone of voice
- A calm facial expression
- A comfortable distance from the child
- A relaxed posture (arms at your sides, hands not on your hips!)

Always trying to understand what the child is feeling underneath his/her behavior
Children who have experienced trauma need:

- Environments where they feel physically and psychologically safe
- Rich experiences that stimulate and enrich brain growth
- Supportive, safe, positive and stable relationships
- Support to develop emotional regulation skills
- Positive role models
- Resilient adults who are aware of their own personal stress and triggers

“Research on both the brain and behavior shows that nurturing and stable relationships with adults are essential for young children. This means that you may have an unparalleled opportunity to make a difference in children’s lives.”

Challenging Behavior in Young Children, 2016
Resources

• Devereux Center for Resilient Children
https://centerforresilientchildren.org/

• Access to ACE Quiz
https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean

• Center on the Developing Child Harvard University
https://developingchild.harvard.edu/

THANK YOU
And
STAY SAFE

Challenging Behavior in Young Children: Understanding, Preventing, and Responding Effectively
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