Trauma Informed Care in Early Childhood

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Learning Objectives

- Attendees will learn the types of trauma and the effects on infant and early childhood brain development.
- Learning how to interpret behaviors through the lens of trauma helps caregivers understand the function of the behaviors.
- Specific strategies to use when working with young children will be demonstrated and provided in a handout.

What percentage of children have experienced trauma?

- 26% of children in the US will witness or experience a traumatic event before the age of 4
- SAMHSA report

Some Statistics

- Children younger than three years of age constituted 31.9 percent of all maltreatment victims reported to authorities in 2007
- Nearly two-thirds of young children attending a Head Start program had either witnessed or been victimized by community violence, according to parent reports.
- In a survey of parents of children aged six and under in an outpatient pediatric setting, it was found that one in ten children had witnessed a knifing or shooting; half the reported violence occurred in the home

Suzy – What is going on?

- Cannot sit with peers during story time
- When is asked to get dressed to go outside will begin to tantrum
- Falls apart quickly
- Aggressive
- Impulsive
- Difficulties calming herself
- Has prolonged tantrums
- Difficulties with transitions

Suzy’s Story

- Has had multiple caregivers
- Has moved 6 times before the age of 3
- Minimal touching, rocking or being held as an infant
- Is it ADHD? Autism? Anxiety? Adjustment to stressors?
- Or is it early life trauma impact?
Iceberg Metaphor

- Just as there is more to an iceberg than what you can see, there is more to a child’s behaviors than what you can see.
- Behaviors are like the part of iceberg that is visible.
- What’s underneath the behaviors? What keeps them going?
- Behaviors are a reflection of what is going on inside a child.

What is trauma?

- Events that are perceived as threatening the life or physical integrity of the child or someone important to the child (and what is perceived as a threat changes with the child’s development).
- Causes an overwhelming sense or terror, helplessness, and horror.
- Producing intense physical effects such as pounding heart, rapid breathing, trembling.
- And completely overwhelming the child’s available coping strategies.
- Not all events create trauma or a mental disorder.

Big T vs. Little t

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Examples of Traumatic Events

- Direct
  - Physical abuse
  - Sexual abuse
  - Neglect
- Witnessed
  - Domestic violence
  - Community violence
- Separation from important people
- Traumatic grief

- Historical trauma
- Acute trauma (dog bite, car accident)
- Medical trauma
- Complex trauma – caused by adults who should have been caring for and protecting the child, creating an “impossible dilemma” for the young child.

Types of Stress

- 3 types of stress
  - Positive stress – normal part of life
  - Tolerable stress – can be managed with support
  - Toxic stress – excessive, prolonged stress that is too much stress with too little adult support


How does the body respond to a threat?

- Response happens on 3 levels
  - Physical: stress hormones are released
  - Behavioral: an action or response
  - Thoughts: what we think or process in our mind
- What can it look like?
  - Fight
  - Fight
  - Freeze
  - Tend and Befriend (care take or become clingy)
  - Babies can’t fight or flight so they use what they have available to them – hyporarousal or shutdown


What happens in the body as a response to stress?

- Body shifts priority – puts on hold future oriented processes (learning doesn’t matter if you are in a life or death state).
- Increase in sympathetic nervous system activity (adrenaline, cortisol).
- Hypersensitization of fear circuits get locked on.
- Reactive stress response system – can’t regulate.
- Systems slow down (digestive, cognitive, thinking, processing, problem solving).
The Brain (Lion, Lizard, Learning)

- Lizard (brain stem—not the smartest part)
- Lion - midbrain – the body’s fire alarm (the lion gets out of its cage sometimes and get out of control - need to learn how to put the lion back in its cage)
  - if you make a fist and put your thumb behind your fingers it acts like the lion for a kid metaphor
- Learning brain - prefrontal cortex - thinking spot - it goes on vacation when the fire alarm goes off - needs time to get the alarm turned off and thinking brain to come back from vacation

Lion
Lizard
Learning

Dan Siegel and the Brain
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-lfP1FBFk

ACE Study
(Adverse Child Experience)

- Over 17,241 participants
- ACE defined as:
  - Childhood abuse and neglect
  - Growing up with domestic violence
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness in the home
  - Parental discord
  - Crime

ACE Outcomes

- Those with more than 3 ACEs are at higher risk for health and behavior problems
- 2/3 of participants reported at least one ACE
- 1/5 reported three or more ACEs

Experiences Build Brains:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNNsN9Ijkws

Predictable Patterns: Malevolent World

Effects on Brain
- Emotion processing region smaller, less efficient
- Efficient production of stress-related chemicals
- Dysregulated hormones
- Less calming receptors
- Less white matter

Behaviors
- Competitive
- Hot tempered
- Impulsive
- Hypervigilant or withdrawn
- Dissociated
- Numb

Long term Impact
- Experiences get wired into biology
- Under the worst conditions, such as war and famine, both the individual and the species survive

Predictable Patterns: Benevolent World

Effects on Brain
- Emotion processing region robust and efficient
- Abundant happy hormones
- High density white matter, especially in mid-brain

Behaviors
- Laid back
- Relationship oriented
- Reflective
- “process over power”

Long term Impact
- By striving for cooperative relationships, individual and species live peacefully

Pregnancy and Infancy Impacts

- Environmental factors and experiences leave chemical imprints on the genetic make-up of the developing child
- There can be alterations in the egg or sperm cells which modifies DNA in the fetus
- Toxins and stress from mother crosses the placenta
- The child can be born with elevated stress hormones
- Can infants “remember” traumatic events?
- There are multiple ways to “recall” experience (sensory remembering)
Impact on Brain Development

- The brain is developed or formed based on experience.
- Health stress system turns on when we need it and off when we don’t (essential to survival)
- Chronic stress affects the brain
- State vs. trait
- Frequent or prolonged activation of the stress systems can alter brain functioning
- Toxic stress can lead to a poorly controlled stress-response system that will be overly reactive or slow to shut down when faced with threats throughout the lifespan

Young Children Are More Vulnerable to Affects of Trauma

- The younger the child the more vulnerable to traumatic stress
- Why?
  - Are unable to predict or anticipate or prepare for impending danger
  - Cannot prevent its occurrence
  - Have fewer coping strategies than adults
  - They depend on adults for protection
- The caregiver’s reaction to trauma is extremely significant to the young child’s ability to accept and process the event

Trauma and Memory

- Cognitive Memory:
  - Immediate recall of facts, dates, names, etc.
- Emotional Memory:
  - There is one for every cognitive memory but is usually 90% unconscious
- Motor Memory:
  - Operating on autopilot - 100% unconscious
- State Memory or Implicit Memory:
  - Body memory
  - This is where trauma memories are stored
  - 100% unconscious and usually unprocessed

Body Memories

- Trauma is buried at our state level which directs all other responses
- Traumatic memories are stored differently in the brain
  - Encoded vivid images and sensations
  - Lack a verbal and narrative context
- They are encoded in vivid images and sensations and lack a verbal narrative and context
- Memories are unprocessed and more primitive
- Can cause flooding when triggers like smells, sights, sounds or reminders present themselves later in life

Triggers or Flashbacks

- Triggers are events/reminders/cues that cause children to become upset again (e.g., rain or thunder for children who experienced a hurricane).
- Reminders may seem harmless to other people.
- Triggers will vary from child to child
- May look like temper tantrums but are often panic attacks
- Can be intense feelings that are often unspeakable
- Can be cognitive – vivid memories which seem to be actually occurring
- Children are more vulnerable to these during quiet times (bedtime, naptime) and so they will avoid them
- Usually a sensory stimuli causes the trigger
  - Sight, sound, smells, internal or external reminders

Examples of Triggers

- Child spat at parent who had been a victim of domestic violence
- Child grew up in a “garbage house” and was triggered every time they smelled “garbage”
Window of Tolerance: Typically Developing Child

Flight/Fight Response

Where learning can happen

Freeze Response

Window Of Tolerance

It’s their “normal” is not our “normal”

- Their behaviors are “normal” considering their internal state of distress

Window of Tolerance For Children with Trauma

A perpetual state of distress distorts our perception of the world and keeps us living in a state of fear

Trauma affects Parenting

- Parents own trauma can prevent them from being able to help their own child regulate fear or distress
- Child can be a trauma reminder
- Parent may not be able to notice danger and protect their children from it
- May associate the child with the aggressor
- Parent who has little capacity to regulate their own arousal and emotions may be unable to provide the regulatory care needed by their child

Template for Relationships can be Impacted

- The caregiver, who is supposed to keep them safe, might be the source of the trauma
- Caregiver’s availability, reliability, or predictability may be limited
- Child may not learn how to regulate emotions when experiencing intense emotions
- Child’s ability to learn might take a “back seat” to the child’s need for protection and safety
- Child begins to perceive the world as dangerous, leading to a sense of vulnerability and distrust of others
- Seeming lack of control over their life can lead to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness

Trauma Shapes Beliefs and Expectations

- Themselves:
  - I am not worthy of love and care
  - I am helpless
  - I must be on constant alert or in control to be safe
- Adults who care for them:
  - Adults cannot be trusted to protect me
  - Adults hurt me
- The world in general:
  - The world is a dangerous place
  - I cannot let down my guard

**Child Development**
- It is important to have a working knowledge of child development to recognize warning signs.
- Each stage builds on the stage before it.
- Impacted by previous experiences.
- Higher number of risk factors, the more likely the child will have significant developmental delays.
- Development is transactional:
  - Occurs within the interactions between child and caregiver.
  - Trauma anywhere within the system impacts the whole system.

**What are the signs?**
- With the people sitting next to you read through the handout given to your group.
- Choose 7-10 signs for the age group that you have.
- Choose the ones that you think are more important to be aware of.
- We will discuss what you have chosen as a group with the large group.

**Effects on Learning**
- Living in a chaotic and unpredictable environment can prevent child from internalizing organization skills.
- Cause and effect may be underdeveloped, natural curiosity of the world may be shut down which prevents them from exploring their world.
- Inhibited sense of self with poor boundaries (little concept of where “I” end and “you” begin) makes it difficult to take another’s perspective.
- Easily distracted and lack focus due to hyperarousal and dissociation leading to challenges with attentiveness.
- May not learn to regulate emotions.
- Thinking part of the brain is underdeveloped so executive functions are less effective.
- Engaging in curricular activities is diminished: it is like trying to play chess during a hurricane.

**Impact on Classroom Behavior**
- More prone to reactivity and impulsivity.
- Aggression:
  - Limited verbal abilities.
  - Learned that violence is a way to solve problems.
  - Increased reactivity and impulsivity.
  - Distorted perceptions of people’s intentions.
- Defiance:
  - Could be freeze response, or attempt to feel in control of a situation.
  - May prefer to be viewed as noncompliant than unable to master a task.
- Withdrawal: rarely attract teacher’s attention.
- Perfectionism: afraid to disappoint caregivers.

**Chronically Acting Out = Communication**
- What are they trying to communicate?
  - “I am unable to handle my overwhelming state of internal stress without your help and I don’t have the words or energy in my brain to get those words out to you.”
- Repetition of 2 things can change the brain:
  - Positive relationships.
  - Positive environment.

**What is “Trauma Informed Care?”**
- An approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives.
- This is not about educators or caregivers doing therapy.
- It is about creating a culture that prioritizes safety, trust, choice and collaboration.
- Awareness of trauma impacts motivates and guides the environment.

Nelson, K. (2011)

http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic
Shift in thinking...

Traditional View
- The child is oppositional, defiant, and manipulative.
- The behaviors are the child’s way of controlling everyone around them.

New View
- The child is in a highly anxious, stressed state of fear.
- The behaviors are the child’s attempt to reduce the fear and stress in order to feel calmer.

Interpreting Behaviors
- Anger often masks fear (angry face interpretation)
- When the adult is angry or fearful it increases the child’s fear/anger
- The child is not trying to control the adults, they are trying to gain internal control – externally through negative behaviors

As Eliana Gil, an expert in childhood trauma puts it, “Everything an abused child does after the abuse is designed to give them a sense of safety.”

Traumatic Play
- Play has a grim, business like and driven quality to it
- Contains traumatic affects that belong to what is being played out
- Child seems “stuck” with the theme
- The play is a way to manage the anxiety but can also be re-traumatizing to the child

Signs of Re-enactment
- They can show signs of both:
  - Avoidance
  - Being withdrawn, daydreaming, avoiding other children
- Physiological hyper-reactivity
  - Anxiety, sleep problems, impulsivity, easily distracted

Child’s Natural Use of Play
- Play is their language
- Their resilience and natural ability to play out what they need can allow for self-healing, IF they have a solid emotional foundation and family supports to draw on
- Offers young children a way to make sense of and integrate confusing and overwhelming emotional experiences.
- Helps them resolve lingering developmental issues
- No study has linked pretend gunplay to future violent behavior

Superhero & Princess Play
- Superhero and princess themes are compelling for young children
  - Boys typically use superhero play while girls use royalty play
  - Overall theme is power, control, strength
  - They are struggling to feel as powerful as they wish they were.
  - Allows caregiver to gain information about what each child knows and has experienced
  - A strong need for creating a superhero or princess persona, is a sign of the internal struggle occurring to control and understand, a rather complicated world
Teacher’s Concerns about Gun Play

- Lack of safety in the classroom.
- Old approaches not working.
- Worries about the limited nature of the play.
- Concerns about lessons learned from the play.
- No study has linked pretend gunplay to future violent behavior.

Trauma Informed Care: Specific Strategies to Promote Healing

Self-Care for Caregivers

- The child’s play, language or behaviors can act as a trauma trigger for caregivers.
- Secondary trauma is possible as well.
- Know your signs of stress.
- Don’t try to do it alone.
- Recognize compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard.
- Seek help with your own trauma if needed.
- Guard against your work becoming your only activity.
- Eat well, exercise, engage in fun activities, take a break, allow yourself to cry, find things to laugh about.

Using the information you have learned about trauma, and the impact on the child should impact the approach we use when working with children.

How can we help create change?

- Repetition, repetition, repetition.
  - It requires 500 times of repetition to re-wire the brain.
  - The reparative experiences need to be similar in nature to the experiences that were lost.

Attachment – why are we talking about it?

- What is it?
- Why is it important to trauma?
- What is the child’s attachment pattern?
  - Why might it be that way?
  - What is their attachment pattern to us?

Nelson, K. (2011)
Components of Complex Trauma Intervention

- Safety
- Self-Regulation
- Relational Engagement
- Positive Affect Enhancement

Other components offered through therapy: self-reflective information processing, and traumatic experiences integration

Safety

- Be aware of your own fears that might actually escalate situations
- Children need to feel safe in their environments
  - It is learned through relationships
  - Learned through relationship
  - If the attachment system isn’t activated the child can’t feel safe
  - Parents need to feel safe too

Classroom Strategies to Establish Safety

- Use the phrases: “this is a safe place” “teacher are here to keep you safe”
- Offer hiding places (tents, invisibility cloak)
- Clear and consistent rules (predictability feels safe)
- Accommodate to meet individual strengths and needs
- Predictable structure, relationships, and environment
- Reduce bullying and harassment
- Use seclusion and restraint only as a last resort
  - Touching a child who has been abused can be a trigger or re-traumatization

Self-Regulation

- Person’s ability to provide control over his or her emotional responses to arousing situations
- Being able to do something because it is needed
- Alan Sroufe states “The ability to regulate our emotions depends on our early childhood interactions with our caregivers.”

- Trauma, Somatic Experiencing and Peter A. Levine PhD
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByalBx8Sp88&feature=youtu.be

Frequently Asked Questions

- Should I talk about the traumatic event if I know about it?
  - Don’t be afraid to talk about it, don’t bring it up on your own but if the child brings it up, let the child guide the conversation
  - How should I talk about it?
    - Use age-appropriate language and explanations
    - This may happen many times, they may need to process it multiple times
  - Do children understand events accurately?
    - They often make false assumptions about the causes, often thinking they are to blame or feel responsible for the event

Teach Self-Regulation Skills

- The 3 R’s
  - Reflect (what is going on)
  - Relate (to the child – get in their shoes)
  - Regulate (adult first, then the child – at least offer it)
- Recognize when a child may be experiencing intense emotions and guide them to effective coping
Strategies for teaching self-regulation:
- Teach children to recognize and name emotions
- Teach students how to identify emotional cues
- Teach student to link their feelings to experiences internally and externally
- Identify resources to safely express feelings
- Create safe and comfortable places to calm down
- Teach assertiveness skills
- Calm down spot or room
- Learn about lower brain interventions: rocking, physical exercise, removal of stimuli, meeting basic needs
- Sensory diets
- Safe and acceptable expression of feelings

Sensory & Calming Activities:
- Mirroring: stand facing each other and mirror each other’s motions
- Hand claps: repeat patterns with each other, take turns being in the lead
- Cotton ball hockey: use a cotton ball and straws to play “hockey”
- Ball toss: releases oxytocin (happy hormones)
- Paint, clay, play doh, sand table, puzzles
- Bubbles: take turns blowing and popping the bubbles, use other body parts to pop them (elbows, knees, etc)

Video
- Deep Down Wisdom Exercise

Staying Cool Tools for Adults:
- Adults must be calm in order to calm a child
- We “choose” to get upset or anxious about a child’s behaviors
- Ways to calm:
  - Deep breathing
  - Visualization (imagining)
  - Color, play with legos, blow bubbles, play catch
  - Stop what you are doing (it might not be working)
  - Drop your emotional and physical level (get lower)
  - Become an observer – “what’s going on here?” and then move into relationship with the child

Relational Engagement
- Children need to be enjoyed and valued – not managed!
- Joy is the key to attachment
- Ask yourself:
  - “What is this behavior telling me?”
  - “What can I do at this very moment to be in relationship with the child?”
- Activities to help build relationship:
  - Maintain unconditional positive regard
  - Check assumptions, observe and question
  - Be a relationship coach

What do they bring out in us?
- We tend to react “in kind”
  - If the child/parent avoids contact, we tend to react as if they don’t need us
  - If the child/parent resists our attempts to care for them, we may tend to react negatively
- We need to break the negative cycle by re-interpreting their behavior to see the neediness underlying resistant or avoidant behaviors

Positive Affect Enhancement

- Young children need to know:
  - I am worthy of nurturing and care
  - I am capable of getting my needs met
  - Adults can be trusted to take care of kids
  - The world can be a safe and interesting place
  - All my feelings are ok, its how I express them that matters
  - Self-worth, esteem and positive self-appraisal
  - Celebrate accomplishments
  - Notice positive choices


When words don’t work...

- Our physical presence and body language are important
- Stay close
- Sing softly
- Hold (if appropriate)
- Rock
- The words can come later
- If we stay calm when they are upset they learn that:
  - I won’t be abandoned during difficult times
  - Momentary rage doesn’t result in rejection
  - Feelings CAN be contained and NOT derail the competency of my caregiver
  - Calm comes after the storm

Rhythmic Attunement

- Drumming as a game or challenge in order to regulate a task (like walking instead of running)
  - Go crazy with the beats and then bring them back down
- Mirroring: do what I do
- Follow the leader
- Tree in the wind: models self-regulation by moving from simple to chaotic back to calm movements
- Humming with slow breathing incorporated
- Tapping (tapping.com)
- Breathing and self-regulation strategies

Where do we go for extra help?

- Mental health clinicians for further assessment
  - Ask if they specialize in trauma treatment
- Medical doctors
- Special education referrals
- Early Childhood Family Education programs
- Help Me Grow
  - Continue to get more training to gain more awareness and understanding on trauma

In Closing:

How children are treated changes who they are and how they will develop.

We learn how to become gentle, loving, caring humans in relationship with parents and caregivers who are gentle, loving, and unconditionally caring.

Sources

- Evers, T. (2012). Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools. Wisconsin Department of Public Education. Madison, WI.
Resources

- Center on the Developing Child
  - http://developingchild.harvard.edu/
- National Center for Trauma Informed Care (SAMHSA)
  - http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
  - http://www.nctsnet.org/
- Adverse Child Experiences Study
  - http://acestudy.org/

Video Resources

- Toxic Stress
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVeFicGZ3he
- Science of Neglect
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bF3j5UVCSCA
- Frank Grijalva - Impact of Intense Trauma on Children’s Brains
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wt2SqvRl5_I
- The Treatment of Trauma: How Childhood Trauma is Different from PTSD
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxPAt-EsvdQ
Ways I Can Calm Down

Smell & Cool the Soup

Pretend I have a bowl of soup in my hands. Smell it, then blow to cool it off.

Tuck Like a Turtle

Tuck into a "shell" like a turtle and take 3 deep breaths to slow myself down.

Stuffed Animal Elevator

Lay down and put a stuffed animal on your tummy. Then take deep breaths to make the animal move up and down like an elevator.

Talk about It

Find a safe person and talk to them about what is making you have big feelings.

Strong Like a Stick Limp Like a Noodle

Make your body stiff like a stick. Then relax your muscles to feel limp and wiggly like a cooked spaghetti noodle.

Draw A Picture

Draw a picture of why I am upset and tell a safe person about my picture.

Count Slow & Quiet

By counting slow and quiet I can calm my body and mind so I can make safe choices.

Blow Out the Candle

Put my finger up like a pretend candle. Then take 4 or 5 deep breaths to "blow the candle out"
Ways I Can Calm Down

Blow Bubbles
Blow bubbles, or have someone else blow them and you pop them.

Sensory Box
Use your sensory box to help you calm down in a quiet spot.

Go for a Walk
Go for a walk. Try to walk all the big feelings out of your body.

Eagle Stretch
Put your arms up like eagle's wings and then raise them up and down like an eagle flaps its wings.

Stress Ball
Squeeze a ball while you breathe in and out.

Quiet Spot
Find a quiet spot to sit and relax.

Ask for a Hug
Ask for a hug or to sit with an adult.

Read a Book
Find a book to read and take your mind off what is bothering you.