Supporting Children Dealing with Trauma: Considerations for Professionals and Relative Caregivers

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What is Trauma??

- A serious injury or shock to the body, as from violence or an accident
- An emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person
- An event or situation that causes great distress and disruption

--Judith Herman

- An external factor that initiates an abrupt change in previous adaptation, and as an external event that overpowers the individual’s capacity to function, “the whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated, and purposeful activity is smashed” --Williams and Sommer
Physical vs. Psychological Trauma

- Trauma can be either physical, psychological or both
- Trauma may begin as one and develop into another
- At times, psychological trauma may be more devastating to the survivor than the original physical trauma
What happens in your body?

Trauma causes changes in our bodies, even when there is no initial physical insult or injury.

- The autonomic nervous system is involved in these changes.
  - Sympathetic nervous system: responsible for “fight or flight”
  - Parasympathetic nervous system: responsible for “rest and digest” and calming the system

While causing opposite responses, these two systems work in a complimentary fashion.
Separation from a biological parent

• Separation from a biological parent may be experienced as traumatic, even if the child did not witness or experience a traumatic event.

• Feelings of loss almost always accompany separation from a primary caregiving figure.

• A child may project their anger on the replacement caregiver.
What is an ACE?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are significant childhood traumas that result in actual changes in brain development -- changes affect a child’s cognitive, social, and mental health.

The Centers for Disease Control view ACEs as "one of, if not the leading determinant, of the health and social well-being of our nation."

http://resiliencetrumpsaces.org/parents.cfm?id=2
Children’s Resilience Initiative
Trauma and Brain Development

• The brain develops in a “use dependent” way
  • Those parts that are used more, develop more (think of a muscle)
  • Those parts that are used less don’t develop as they should

• The brain develops from the bottom up-most primitive (regulatory) first, and more complex later

• Chronic or prolonged stress causes the stress response system to become over developed
What trauma can do!

3 year old children

[Images of brain scans: Normal vs. Extreme Neglect]

http://aces tochigh.com/
Consequences of Trauma

You can take the child out of the trauma, but it is harder to take the trauma out of the child.

Removing a person from a traumatic environment and logically expecting them to discontinue the early adaptations to trauma is futile.

The brain is lacking developed neural networks to process comfort, support, or hopefulness.

Earliest brain functions are programmed for fight or flight to ensure survival—this can limit the ability to regulate emotions.
Absence of self regulation

Child is caught in a reactive cycle of perceived threats

Child is preoccupied with external issues rather than understanding internal experiences

Lack of learning internal awareness is vital for self regulation

- The awareness of internal experience and the ability to make conscious decisions of how to act accordingly

Traumatized individuals do not understand why they say or do what they do, and often do things that don’t make sense; bodies are on automatic pilot

- NOT helpful to ask “Why...”
3 Levels of Stress

- **Positive Stress**
  - Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

- **Tolerable Stress**
  - Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

- **Toxic Stress = Trauma & Disruption**
  - Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.

adapted from
https://www.ccfc.ca.gov/pdf/about/annual_conference/sessions/1J_TraumaInformedCaregivingFosterCare.pdf
### Sign of Traumatic Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Children</th>
<th>Elementary School Children</th>
<th>Middle and High School Children</th>
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| • Fear being separated from their parent/caregiver  
• Cry or scream a lot  
• Eat poorly or lose weight  
• Have nightmares | • Become anxious or fearful  
• Feel guilt or shame  
• Have a hard time concentrating  
• Have difficulty sleeping | • Feel depressed or alone  
• Develop eating disorders or self-harming behaviors  
• Begin abusing alcohol or drugs  
• Become involved in risky sexual behavior |

What is a “relative caregiver”?

“Relative means an adult who is related to the child by blood, adoption, or affinity within the words “great”, “great-great”, or “grand” or the spouse of any of these persons even if the marriage was terminated by death or dissolution.”

Welfare and Institutions Code section WIC 361.3(c)(2)
How do children come to be raised by relative caregivers?
Unplanned Parenthood

• Sylvie De Toledo, founder and clinical director of Grandparent As Parents, refers to grandparents raising grandchildren as “unplanned parenthood”
### Challenges for older adults raising children

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Loss or changes in income</th>
<th>• Changes in lifestyle</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of guilt</td>
<td>• Involvement of various legal systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges with adult child</td>
<td>• Physical demands of parenting 24/7</td>
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<td>Change in role from grandparent to parent</td>
<td>• New responsibilities in navigating education system</td>
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<td>Being looked at questionably as a parent of a child who can’t parent their own child</td>
<td>• Lack of peer support</td>
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A Trauma Informed Partnership Considers...

• *Realizes* the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;

• *Recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;

• *Responds* by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and

• Seeks to actively resist *re-traumatization*."

Adapted from https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions
Trauma Informed Approach to Partnership

Principles of a trauma informed approach

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice and choice
- Cultural, historical and gender issues

https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions
Partnership Activity
Questions?