

Creating a Safe Space:

tips for how to provide safety for children exposed to trauma

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This is hard work for everyone...



Prevalence of Trauma in U.S.

- Every year, more than 1,500 children die of abuse or neglect.
- Almost 700,000 children were substantiated victims of maltreatment in 2010.
- Over 60% of children exposed to violence or abuse in their homes or communities
- One in 10: victims of violence 5 or more times
- Four of 10: witness violence (incl. DV)
- 8% report lifetime prevalence of sexual assault
- 17% report physical assaults
- **In 2014 Statewide there were 4,137 substantiated victims of maltreatment.**



Types of Trauma

- **Acute:** a single traumatic event that is limited in time.
- **Chronic:** the experience of multiple traumatic events.
- **Complex:** exposure to chronic trauma and the impact of exposure.
- **Historical:** personal or historical event or prolonged experience that impacts several generations.
- **Medical:** Chronic illness, injury, treatment (prevalent in foster youth).



Some Sources of ongoing Stress for kids

- o Poverty
- o Discrimination
- o Separations from parent/siblings
- o Frequent moves
- o School problems
- o Traumatic grief and loss
- o Refugee or immigrant experiences



What Is Child Traumatic Stress?

- Child traumatic stress refers to the *physical and emotional responses* of a child to threatening situations.
- Affect youth's:
 - o Ability to trust others
 - o Sense of personal safety
 - o Effectiveness in navigating life changes
- o **Something that is traumatic for one child may not be traumatic for another.**

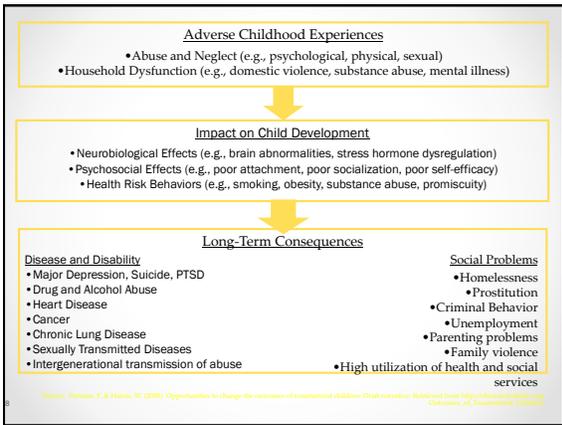


Adverse Childhood Experiences

Household dysfunction:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation/divorce
- Incarcerated household member

Source: Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*, 245-258.



Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma

- High-risk or destructive coping behaviors
- Risk for serious mental and physical health problems, including:
 - Alcoholism
 - Drug abuse
 - Depression
 - Suicide attempts
 - Sexually transmitted diseases (due to high risk activity with multiple partners)
 - Heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease

Source: Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*, 245-258.

What Does this mean for me?

- The child's perception of trauma is developmentally driven.
- The child's perception of trauma is more important than a professional opinion.
- If I understand the reasons why a child is behaving the way he/she is, I'm more likely to develop an effective referral and treatment/ case plan.
- The better the treatment plan, the greater the likelihood the child won't suffer long term consequences.

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The Invisible Suitcase



- Trauma affects development and therefore expectations, and beliefs about the world, the self, and the people who take care of the child.
- Many children carry around an "invisible suitcase" of beliefs about themselves and people who care for them.

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Invisible Suitcase

- You didn't create it...
- Its not about you...
- But you can understand it and help unpack it.



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Maya

- Cries and screams but doesn't like to be comforted
- Is easily startled and upset by loud noises
- Becomes upset at the doctor
- Calms down when she can hold a bottle that is propped up but doesn't want to be fed by caregiver
- Seems to take comfort in a certain song
- 8 months old

Maya's Suitcase

- Maya can't tell you what is in her suitcase even if she wanted to do so.
- But her history tells you that she has experienced significant traumas:
 - exposure to domestic violence
 - physical abuse
 - separation from her mother
 - medical trauma – including time with her arms in casts

Maya's Memory

- | Explicit | Implicit |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicit memory develops around age 2 with language.• You can tell the story of the memory. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "The body remembers"• Young children take in memory with their senses... touch, feel, taste, and sound• Not tied to language |

What does she believe?

- Crying is scary.
- When I cry, no one responds.
- When I cry, others hit me or get mad at me.
- Nobody comforts me so I will do it myself.
- I'm not worthy of care.
- People cause pain not comfort.
- People are not safe.
- People cannot be trusted.
- The world is a dangerous place.
- Bottles and music are good.
- Hospitals are bad.

Repacking Maya's suitcase

- People come when I cry.
- People know what I need.
- Touch isn't scary.
- Hospitals can be a helpful place.
- I can make people respond to me in other ways rather than crying.
- The world is a safe place.
- People can be trusted.
- I am important and loved.

Your own Suitcase



- Be sure to check your own "suitcase" and be aware of your own issues
- Many people who work in this field have experienced trauma or have secondary trauma
- Take care of your own baggage...



Safety

- The condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury or loss
- Physical and emotional safety
- Think of a time you felt unsafe, endangered or worried... what do you remember feeling physically and emotionally?
- Think of what it took to make you feel safe and secure... What did you feel like physically and emotionally?

Safety and Trauma

- Children who have experienced trauma need more **control** and **reassurance**.
- Give some examples of this from your work
- Have valid concerns about their own safety and safety of people they love
- Find it hard to trust adults CAN and will protect them
- May be hyperaware of threats, some that we find illogical
- Have trouble controlling physiological arousal when threatened.

What is happening?



Psychological Safety

- Familiarize them with surroundings
- Give them choices
- Set some limit so they aren't overwhelmed
- Talk about what is going to happen next – give some direction of what is going on and how decisions are made
- Each child is different and unique so provide them with opportunities to express themselves. Don't think you "know" a child because of their history.
- Help them make connections with culture or their past if it seems comforting.. Follow their lead here.

Give a Safety Message

- Engage the worker to help stay with the child or someone who is known to the child (secure bases)
- Be eye level and use age appropriate language
- Make a promise you can keep – "I'm going to do everything I can to keep you safe"
- Ask the child what they need to feel safe (use age appropriate language – young children can't tell you what they need, watch behaviors)
- Follow the child's lead – if they are too anxious or upset wait to give a safety message

Rules and Routines

- Have clear expectations but don't expect perfection
- Remember the invisible suitcase
- Start with essential rules and routines – don't overwhelm



Emotional Container



- You are much more skilled than children at containing emotions.
- They feel overwhelmed and lack the skills to handle the difficult emotions brought on by the trauma and reminders of the trauma.

Emotional Container

- Negative beliefs and expectations in the invisible suitcase are often acted out to try to provoke "known" and predictable responses
- Staying calm and appropriately approving or disapproving of the child's behavior is a gift.
- "I started cursing at the foster mom. I figured that sooner or later she would say something that would hurt me. I wanted to hurt her first..."

Emotional Container

- Be willing.. Be prepared... and Be tolerant of strong emotional reactions.
- Remember the suitcase. Psst... Its not about you!
- Respond calmly but firmly.
- Help the child identify and label feelings.
- Set good examples of handling feelings appropriately

Hot Spots



- Situations that are difficult for children who have experienced trauma
- Trigger a child to act out, struggle, or become emotionally upset

Hot Spots

- Mealtimes or other situations around food
- Bed time, getting to sleep, staying asleep, and being awakened
- Anything involving boundaries – bath time, privacy, medical exams
- Know your own "hot spots"
- When are you less likely to be able to tolerate and handle calmly an emotional child?
- Hungry, sleepy, sick rule

Trauma Reminders

- To feel safe we need to feel control over the environment and control over ourselves
- Trauma reminders can be: sights, smells, things, places, people words, colors or even feelings.
- Prompt behavior that seems out of place but originally made sense
- May bring up intense feelings
- May or may not be awareness that a trauma reminder is occurring

Trauma Reminders

- Can be chronic
- May make the child appear to be overreacting or disruptive
- May cause isolation or avoidance of certain people, places or things
- May cause embarrassment in older children and adolescents
- May be mistaken for bad behavior

Spotting Trauma Reminders



- Not just for therapists to spot trauma reminders
- Often happen during real world experiences
- Helps to understand behavior or strong emotions

How to Spot Trauma Reminders

1. Be Observant : When did the reaction occur?
What happened before it? Where did it occur?
What time of day? What other cues were present?
Sights, sounds, smells, people places and things?
2. Reduce exposure until the child can regulate their emotions better.
3. Tell the therapist, caseworker, foster parent – whomever the child works with regularly to manage trauma reminders.
4. Stay regulated yourself – you provide cues about whether the environment is safe – if you are upset – so are children around you.

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