An Introduction to Trauma in Early Childhood

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Introduction

• Psychotherapist with a family systems orientation, and a specialization in early childhood dyadic therapies.
• Level 1 Trainer in Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT).
• Delivers PCIT, Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP), Theraplay and expressive therapies.
Objectives
What are we hoping to accomplish?

1. Define trauma for children from birth to 5 years old.
2. Name the types of stress and trauma.
3. Learn 3 ways of conceptualizing trauma.
4. Name 3 domains of development that are impacted by trauma.
5. List 3 ways that a provider can offer support a caregiver and young child.
6. Name at least one way that a provider can practice self-care.

Note for self-care: Given that this presentation is a discussion of childhood trauma, please pay attention to your individual response and pause this at any point where you may feel overwhelmed or triggered by any content discussed in this presentation.
Closely examining children ages 2-5, we see an overwhelming prevalence of emerging concerns.

Figure 1 Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in preschoolers, children and adolescents, and adults. Data abstracted from: Angold, Egger, Erkanli, & Keeler, submitted; Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005; Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005b.

Defining Childhood Trauma

“An experience that is emotionally painful, distressing or shocking, that provokes feelings of extreme fear, vulnerability or helplessness, and that can cause lasting psychological and/or physical effects.”

-National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
From the perspective of a child:

Where does stress end and trauma begin?
Types of Stress

- **POSITIVE**: Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.
- **TOLERABLE**: Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.
- **TOXIC**: Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University identifies three types of stress.

“When toxic stress response occurs continually, or is triggered by multiple sources, it can have a cumulative toll on an individual’s physical and mental health—for a lifetime.”

Types of Trauma

- **Acute trauma** refers to an event that happens at a specific time and place, typically once.
- **Chronic trauma** refers to ongoing or multi-incident trauma of the same type.
- **Complex trauma** refers to the experience of ongoing, varied events, often interpersonal.
Examples of Acute Trauma

- Car accident
- Natural disaster
- School violence
- House fire
- Crime victimization
- Single-incident bullying (cyber and in-person)
- Medical procedures
- Immigration experience
- Isolated incident of physical, sexual or verbal assault or abuse
- Sudden loss of a family member

Examples of Chronic Trauma

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Victimization or bullying
- Community violence or war
- Homelessness or frequent change of caregivers
- Familial instability, extreme poverty
DEVELOPMENTAL COMPLEX TRAUMA

When a child experiences more than one type of event, more than once, often of an interpersonal nature, a child is more likely to experience lasting impacts of neurological development and in their adaptive responsive system (van der Kolk, B, 2005).

Implicit and Explicit Memory

- Trauma may be experienced **preverbally**.
- Memories may be stored in the **implicit memory or live in the body** if the child is preverbal.
- Children who store their experience in the implicit memory may use toys or objects to **recreate the experience**.
- Later in childhood, children are more likely to store memories in their **explicit memory and have more language** to assign to their experience.

(Cordón et al., 2004)
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

67% of the population experienced at least one ACE.

The dosage of ACEs is connected to 7 out of 10 of the leading causes of death.

Individuals who experienced 4 or more ACEs before they turned 18 years old were more likely to shorten their lifespan by 20 years.

Ongoing research is expanding the definition and expanding demographic.
Adverse Childhood Experiences

1. Physical Abuse
2. Emotional Abuse
3. Sexual Abuse
4. Physical Neglect
5. Emotional Neglect
6. Parental separation/divorce
7. Household Substance Abuse
8. Household Mental Illness
9. Domestic Violence
10. Parent incarceration

"Early experience shapes the structure and function of the brain. This reveals the fundamental way in which gene expression is determined by experience."
Daniel J. Siegel
What does that really mean?

Disrupted Neurodevelopment

Children who experience trauma spend more time and resources preoccupied with survival and regulation, than those who have not.

How does neurodevelopment intersect with the environment?
Social & Environmental Context of ACEs

The Pair of ACEs
Adverse Childhood Experiences

Maternal Depression
Physical & Emotional Neglect

Emotional & Sexual Abuse
Divorce

Substance Abuse
Mental Illness

Domestic Violence
Incarceration

Homelessness
Violence

Adverse Community Environments

Poverty
Community Disruption

Discrimination
Lack of Opportunity, Economic Mobility & Social Capital

Violence
Poor Housing

Quality & Affordability


Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Traumatic Brain Injury
Depression
Suicide

PTSD
Substance Use
Pregnancy

Mental Health Disorders
STDs
Cancer

Diabetes
Alcohol & Drug Abuse

Unsafe Sex
Educational

Opportunities
Risky Behavior

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/images/acestudy/ACEs-consequences-large.png
Trauma causes a drastic disruption in a child’s experience of the world and their development. A child’s system does its best to respond to their world by adapting or maladapting to the stimuli. Given that a human aims to survive, this impacts several domains based on the context.

**Domains of impact**

- Attachment relationships
- Biological functioning
- Affect regulation
- Behavioral control
- Cognitive functioning
- Self-concept
Impact of Trauma and the Environment on Temperament

- The autonomic nervous system (ANS) responds to stimuli received by the 5 senses (see, hear, feel, smell, taste).
- As children develop, they build a window of tolerance to metabolize stimuli and use it to master developmental tasks.
- Adversity shrinks or inhibits the size of the window of tolerance.
- Instead, children live in a space of hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal in response to their environment.
- Fight, flight, freeze, and submission are another way of conceptualizing what happens once the child is outside of the window.

The Window of Tolerance

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Symptoms are adaptations that are formed in response to trauma.

- Difficulty separating
- Behavioral outbursts
- Regression in previously mastered milestones
- Re-enactment of the traumatic event
- Disturbance in eating and/or sleeping
- Emotionally inconsolable or seemingly checked-out
- Sensorimotor development problems
- If expressive, difficulty communicating needs

The Importance of Secure Attachment Relationships

CIRCLE OF SECURITY

- Secure Base
  - Support My Exploration
  - Watch over me
  - Delight in me
  - Help me
  - Enjoy with me

- Safe Haven
  - Protect me
  - Comfort me
  - Delight in me
  - Organize my feelings
  - Welcome My Coming To You

Always: be BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER, and KIND.
Whatever possible: follow my child's need.
Whatever necessary: take charge.
When a caregiver has also experienced trauma in their lifetime, their disrupted system may lead to an intergenerational transmission of trauma.

**Development of poor appraisals, cognitive style, and coping strategies**

- Increased stressor experiences
- Poor mental health
- Increased reactivity to stressors

**Parenting Deficits**

- Poor parenting, abuse, neglect, etc

**Generation 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Recapitulates Generation 1

“The most important thing that parents need to understand is that the brain of their child will become exactly what the child was exposed to. That is the beauty of the human brain. It is the mirror to the child’s developmental experience.”

-Bruce Perry

Promoting healing

- Nonjudgmental space
- Co-regulation
- Attuned interactions
- Empowerment
- Detection through assessment
- Education
- Referrals
- Self-care

https://healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/portals/0/Health/MIECHV/MIECHVHome1.png
Creating trauma-informed systems

- Strengthen economic supports to families
  - Strengthening household financial security
  - Family-friendly work policies
- Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting
  - Public engagement and enforcement campaigns
  - Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment
- Provide quality care and education early in life
  - Preschool enrichment with family engagement
  - Improved quality of child care through licensing and accreditation
- Enhance parenting skills to promote healthy child development
  - Early childhood home visitation
  - Parenting skill and family relationship approaches
- Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk
  - Enhanced primary care
  - Behavioral parent training programs
  - Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure
  - Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/ace-graphics.html

Engaging in self-care

- Reflective supervision
- Balance
- Mindfulness
- Supportive network
- Health
- Self-development
- Professional development

## Resources

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Name</th>
<th>Link</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sesame Street: useful site for free tools to use with parents (in English and Spanish)</td>
<td><a href="https://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits">https://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Disease Control (CDC): Resources for parents</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/index.html">http://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/index.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Disease Control (CDC) ACES study</td>
<td><a href="https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acesstudy/index.html">https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acesstudy/index.html</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for the Developing Child</td>
<td><a href="https://developingchild.harvard.edu/">https://developingchild.harvard.edu/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation</td>
<td><a href="https://www.ecmhc.org/">https://www.ecmhc.org/</a></td>
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<td>Dr. Nadine Burke Harris: a TED Talk about ACES</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime/discussion?referrer=playlist-11_ted_talks_by_brilliant_women">http://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime/discussion?referrer=playlist-11_ted_talks_by_brilliant_women</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZerotoThree: resources for providers and parents</td>
<td><a href="https://www.zerotothree.org/">https://www.zerotothree.org/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)</td>
<td><a href="https://learn.nctsn.org/">https://learn.nctsn.org/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hand model of the human brain</td>
<td><a href="https://scontent-iad3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/28958709_1934687316573005_5977411669488915459_n.jpg?_nc_cat=111&amp;_nc_oc=AQlDFnmmrb5BrFxoaJAk-YM0FGLkItONSP0EQD4tBHevti5vwxnL_bGfhOsn4wwjBpg&amp;_nc_ht=scontent-iad3-1.xx&amp;oh=190337f5539ad27cfe76b9d12ff64c96&amp;oe=5E0AA366">https://scontent-iad3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/28958709_1934687316573005_5977411669488915459_n.jpg?_nc_cat=111&amp;_nc_oc=AQlDFnmmrb5BrFxoaJAk-YM0FGLkItONSP0EQD4tBHevti5vwxnL_bGfhOsn4wwjBpg&amp;_nc_ht=scontent-iad3-1.xx&amp;oh=190337f5539ad27cfe76b9d12ff64c96&amp;oe=5E0AA366</a></td>
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## References

Thank you for taking time and investing in our early childhood population!