Untangling the Power that Binds: Working with Parents with Histories of Early Childhood Trauma

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- Prevent Child Abuse America
- Primary Prevention
- Infant Mental Health Model
- Trauma Informed
Our Journey

- Impacts of Early Childhood Trauma
- The Stress Connection
- Therapeutic Approaches
Early Childhood Trauma

- Separation from attachment figure
- Witnessing Violence
- Severe Neglect
- Physical, emotional, sexual abuse
- Traumatic birth experiences
- Unpredictable and critical parenting
- Raised in homes with substance abuse and/or
- Stress!
Before birth: The Impact of Prenatal Stress
Early Experiences and Brain Wiring

Experience

- Cortex
- Limbic System
- Brain Stem
The Lens

- No one will be there for me
- The world is not a safe place
- I am not lovable or worthy of love
- I have to take what I need
- I need to get what I want now
- People are not trustworthy
- I have no control
- I’m not capable
When the Past becomes Present

Explicit Memory

Implicit Memory
Limbic System Distortions

- Reaction = memory recall

- Extremes
  - Left brain dominance
  - Right brain dominance

- Amygdala – Controls Emotions
  - 5:1 Negativity Bias
  - Fight, Flight, Freeze
Overactive Stress Response System

• Impacts Physical Health

• Impacts Brain Functioning/Learning
  – Corpus callosum
  – Hippocampus

• Impacts Mental Health
  – Coping
  – Emotional regulation
Adversity Impacts Brain Development

**Healthy Brain**
This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.

**An Abused Brain**
This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian orphan, who was institutionalized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.
Impact of Stress on Dopamine Receptors

• Decrease in pleasure

• Increase in addictive behaviors

• Reduced Motivation

Ira Chesnoff, University of Illinois College of Medicine
Addictions are coping strategies.

**Addiction**
- Drugs
- Violence
- Alcohol
- Smoking
- Eating
  - Overeating
  - Sugar and carbs
- Excessive television
- Video games
- Shopping

**Why?**
- Attempt to bring the body into balance
- Improve mood
- Feel pleasure
- Decrease/avoid pain
- Release anxiety
- Increase Calmness
- Increase motivation
Consequences of Early Childhood Trauma for Adults:

• Disrupted Stress Response
• Learning/memory difficulties
• Emotional Regulation
• Capacity for empathy
• Higher level thinking
• Physical health problems
• Mental health struggles
• Relationship problems
Mary Ainsworth: Attachment concepts

• All people attach – survival depends on it

• 4 types of attachment
  – Secure
  – Avoidant
  – Ambivalent
  – Disorganized
Goals of the attachment system

- To ensure survival and safety
- To develop a sense of “felt security”
- To use this secure base to support effective exploration and learning
Impacts Attachment:

– Child’s needs experienced as threats

– Child’s needs are experienced as rejection

– Parent emotionally unavailable

– Children who receive little face time grow up to be adults who have difficulty reading their child’s cues
The Stress – Oxytocin Connection

• Early Childhood Trauma lowers oxytocin levels

• Impacts relationships

• Impacts attachment

• Impacts health
  – Anti-inflammatory
Common Life Struggles

• Difficulty keeping employment
• Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships
• Addictions (smoking, drugs, alcohol, food...)
• Difficulty budgeting
• Difficulty planning ahead
• Difficulty controlling anger or expressing feelings
What you Might See on Home Visits

- Restricted ability to use cognitive, teaching, content-based material
- Lack of “performance” and “consistency” (no follow-through, no show)
- Viewing relationships through the lens of survival.

Content derived Kenny Miller
“Trauma-informed care is 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.”

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRAUMA INFORMED CARE
Trauma Informed Practice

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Strength-based Approach
Principles: Working with families with Early Childhood Trauma

• Success of your role depends on your relationship

• Unmet relationship needs from early years prevent access to higher developmental process.

• Respond to the early childhood wounds within a healthy relationship, higher functioning comes naturally.
Our Focus: Dyadic Approach

Connection

Exercising the Cortex

Emotional Regulation

Healing takes time
Encourage Connection
The Power of Routine & Traditions

• Lowers household stress

• Child adjustment – resiliency

• Stronger family relationships

Horacio Sanchez, Resiliency Inc.
Journal of Family Psychology Copyright 2002, Vol. 16, No. 4, 381–390
Touch: A Basic Need

- Infant/Child massage
- Holding and Hugging
- Proximity
The Need Behind every Behavior

“At the root of every tantrum and power struggle are unmet needs”

Marshall Rosenberg
Exercise the Cortex

Neuroplasticity!

- Experience verses teaching
- Problem solving questions verses advice
- Impact statements verses praise
- Wondering verses telling
Brain Wise Programs

• Movement

• Breath

• Hydration

• Sunlight
Emotional Regulation

• Expand the Feeling vocabulary

• Acknowledge feelings and act from values

• Acknowledge the positive intent behind the behavior
Bring Joy into the Work

- Smiles = serotonin
- Something joyful about every family
- Fun activities
- Celebrations
- Attitude of Gratitude
- Humor

Pleasure chemicals!
Trauma Stewards

- Stay present when it’s painful
- Believe in another’s ability to heal and grow
- Practice Self-Reflection
- Prioritize self-care
"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

~Leo Buscaglia